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COBALT-SERIES

マリア様がみてる

チェリーブロッサム

今野緒雪

集英社

Volume 9

Cherry Blossom

The Cherry in the Ginkgoes

"Gokigenyou."

"Gokigenyou."

The clear morning greeting travels through the serene, blue sky.

Today, once again, the maidens that gather in the Virgin Mary's garden smile purely to one another as they pass under the tall gateway.

Wrapping their innocent bodies and souls is a deep-colored school uniform.

Walking slowly so as to not disturb the pleats in their skirts, so as to not toss their white sailor scarves into disarray... such is the standard of modesty here. Running here because one is in danger of missing class, for instance, is too undignified a sight for students to wish upon themselves.

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

Founded in Meiji 34, this academy was originally intended for the young women of nobility, and is now a Catholic academy of prestigious tradition. Placed in downtown Tokyo, where you can still see traces of Musashi Field's greenery, it is protected by God, a garden where maidens can receive tutelage from pre-school to university.

Time passes, and even now, in Heisei, three era-names past Meiji, it is a valuable academy, where nurtured ladies raised in greenhouses are shipped out in carefully packaged boxes after 18 years of schooling - an arrangement that continues to survive.

Spring.

Amidst the cherry blossom petals that are gently falling like powdered snow.

That's where Maria-sama stands.

Not wiping the accumulation of light pink petals from her shoulder, gazing up and slightly to the side, staring at the cherry trees.

Eventually, noticing my gaze, she smiles elegantly.

"Gokigenyou."

On closer inspection, the Maria-sama standing there is wearing the same uniform as me.

Falling Cherry Blossoms / Exam Failure

Part 1.

"Oh, isn't that Noriko-san over there?"

"Huh?"

Hearing her name called, the young girl that had her eyes on the ground as she walked along the path lined with ginkgo trees turned around. Her short bob-cut hair swayed gently like a murmuring brook.

"Gokigenyou."

There were three girls wearing the same uniform as Noriko. Standing there, smiling amiably.

"You're by yourself? If you'd like, we could walk to class together."

"... Umm."

Noriko thought, "This is bad."

Despite instinctively turning to look at them, Noriko had absolutely no idea who it was that had called out to her.

"Well, it's only been four days since the entrance ceremony. It's probably too much to ask that you've remembered our names?"

"Hah ... "

Obviously she couldn't respond to the smiling girls with, "Actually, I don't even remember your faces." Instead, Noriko adopted the same expression as them and started off with, "Gokigenyou everyone." Since they called out to her, they were probably in the same class.

"Forgive me, I haven't been able to memorize everyone in the class's name just yet."

"That's understandable. Noriko-san took the entrance exam to come to Lillian's from another school."

The three girls then politely introduced themselves with, "I'm Touko," "I'm Atsuko", "I'm Miyuki."

"Touko-san, Atsuko-san, Miyuki-san."

As a courtesy, Noriko recited the names of the three girls. Appending the honorific "-san" to their names was the standard at this school, although she still wasn't quite used to that.

(Touko, Atsuko, Miyuki. Touko, Atsuko, Miyuki. Touko, Atsuko, Miyuki... it's not happening.)

Their polite self-introductions would probably be wasted effort. Because, by tomorrow, Noriko would surely have forgotten this incantation.

(It's because they all look the same.)

They each had different faces and hairstyles, but the overall impression was still the same.

With their old-fashioned uniforms and the same polite manner of speaking, they were all innocent, kind-hearted, adorable angels.

(Although since I got in, they mustn't check your parents' income or pedigree.)

Looking around, all she could see were well-mannered, upper-class daughters.

"Now, Noriko-chan. Shall we go? Come on."

"Hah."

Having been stared down by the angels, Noriko could only follow along behind them.

"Ever since the entrance ceremony, I've been thinking I'd like to get to know you better Noriko-san."

Said the girl with ringlets hanging past her ears, who had called herself Touko. It was a retro hairstyle that wasn't all that common on the street but it didn't look out of place at all here, perhaps due to the antique design of the school uniform.

The problem was the uniform.

The cloth that was matte black with just a drop of green, the ivory sailor collar with a line through it, that was something. But low-waist dresses weren't that sought after these days. Add to that, it was rare that skirts were kept beneath the knee, making it something of an endangered species.

Completing the set was three-fold white socks and black leather ballet-style shoes, it was just – .

(Where is this place? What century is it in?)

As she walked, Noriko idly gazed at the row of girls. None of them were grappling with the endangered species question, they were just wearing the clothes. Until now, nobody had ever been rude enough to consider the possibility of redesigning the uniform.

(However.)

As she lumbered on, Noriko plucked at the hem of her pleated skirt.

It looked as though she was the only one that thought that, no matter how she looked at it, the uniform didn't suit her. But that was probably all in her mind.

I'm different to those girls.

Noriko knew full well that she was the exception.

"At the entrance ceremony, Noriko-san, you gave the welcome as the new students' representative, didn't you?"

When Noriko raised her head, waiting there were Touko's sparkling eyes. It looked as though their conversation wasn't over yet.

"The welcome ... what of it?"

She chose her words with care. Until she fully understood what type of place this was, she should take care not to stand out.

"Nothing, it's just that you draw attention to yourself by virtue of being the one who gave that welcome."

Touko smiled at Noriko's odd expression as she tried to decipher those words, then gently adjusted the shape of Noriko's ribbon.

"A disheveled ribbon would draw even more attention."

"?"

"It would be bad if you were cautioned by an older student."

– She seemed to be a meddler.

The path through the ginkgo trees meandered from place to place. The girls stopped right at the point where the path forked.

There was a small fenced garden at this location.

In the small garden there was a small pond, and surrounding it a small grove, with a pure white statue of the virgin Mary right in the middle. Welcoming the students as they arrived from the front gate.

"Maria-sama. Please watch over us today as always, so that we can live our life properly in accordance with God's teachings."

In front of her, Maria-sama smiled with a profound benevolence as the innocent angels beside her wholeheartedly offered up their prayers.

(Please forgive me, Maria-sama.)

Noriko imitated her three classmates and joined her hands in prayer. Then, deep in her heart, she felt regret.

(Honestly, someone like me isn't qualified to stand before Maria-sama.)

When she opened her eyes and gently looked up, Maria-sama was simply looking back at her, and no reply was forthcoming.

"You were praying quite earnestly there, Noriko-san. What were you discussing with Maria-sama?"

The smiling faces of those innocent girls brought on even greater feelings of guilt.

"Ah. Um, I was praying that I'd quickly become accustomed to school life."

Noriko answered, with a strained smile.

"My! Maria-sama will surely look after you."

The three angels agreed, their shining eyes showing not even a trace of disbelief.

(... Ah, a bed of nails.)

Would she be able to survive three years at this place? Noriko surreptitiously sighed.

Even though her school life was only just beginning.

Part 2.

– Reverse "Hidden Christian."

That was the masochistic nickname that Noriko had given herself.

(My hobby's viewing Buddhist statues, yeah.)

In her spare time, she'd visit Buddhist temples and admire their statues. But that wasn't the sort of thing you could say out loud at a Catholic school.

There was no image of Kannon inside the statue of Maria-sama.

A long time ago, persecuted Christians would pray before statues of the virgin Mary shaped to look like the goddess Kannon, but she wasn't even close to being that devout. Noriko was simply charmed by the beauty of the shape of Buddhist statues.

The cherry trees were visible from the windows of the first-year camellia group classroom.

Since they'd been in full bloom on the day of the entrance ceremony, the branches were now quite bare. But even so, when the wind blew, there was a scattering of petals like the first flurries of snow.

The sister in charge of religious education was telling a story related to the bible scriptures.

(If it hadn't been snowing that day ...)

Noriko would ponder this from time to time.

Speculating that she wouldn't have been here.

Another place would have been made for her, not here, and that place must be her proper location, right?

The snow of roughly a month and a half ago combined with the somewhat refined hobby for a 15-year old girl had changed the course of Noriko's life.

– She'd lost out in the fiercely competitive entrance exams.

She hadn't tasted a setback related to studying. She was more than confident that she could conquer the high-school entrance exams. She got a passing grade on all the mock exams for her first-choice school, and her

homeroom teacher had given her the seal of approval, saying she'd definitely pass.

So why was it that she was currently here? For no other reason than that on the day of the entrance exam, she wasn't able to make it to the examination hall. All the seals of approval in the world didn't count for anything if you didn't take the test.

On the day before the entrance exam, Noriko was in Kyoto.

That day was the one day every twenty years that a certain temple made their statue of Kannon viewable to the public. – Once in twenty years. If she let that chance escape, she'd be 35 by the time it came around again.

She didn't even think about it. Chiba and Kyoto were close enough for it to be a day-trip.

However.

(As they say, going's easy, it's the coming back that's hard.)

Unfortunately, bullet-train services were suspended due to heavy snow. So, the only option she had was to accept the offer she'd already received to attend Lillian's Girls Academy.

"Nijou-san, are you listening?"

"Ah, yes."

The sisters didn't get angry, even when the students looked out the windows.

Maria-sama's always watching over you. That sort of thing was all they'd say.

"There's also Chapter 15 in the Gospel According to Luke."

It was the story about a shepherd with 100 sheep, asking if he'd leave behind 99 sheep to search for the one that had gone missing. The Bible was overflowing with parables.

The sister was still lecturing as she spread her arms wide.

"The Lord will not abandon those who seek his assistance. Let us pray together. For God is pleased when we guide his lost little lambs."

Part 3.

After school.

The girl with the French braids, her name was Atsuko, or Kazuko, or something like that, looked straight at Noriko and said:

"Noriko-san, if you'd like, we could go and check out the various clubs together."

"Ahh, clubs ... "

"For extra-curricular activities. Are you involved with any, Noriko-san?"

"No, not really."

"Then please come. You really should join a club."

Atsuko(probably)-san said, her eyes glittering. Then she went on to say that famous lecturers would occasionally give speeches to some of the cultural clubs. As expected from a school for noble ladies.

"Obviously there's clubs for flower arranging, tea ceremony and traditional dancing, but there's also Go and shogi clubs, arts and crafts clubs, as well as an abundance of sports clubs."

"Hah."

"Incidentally, Touko-san's joining the drama club. Miyuki-san and I have decided to join the scripture reading club. If you'd like, we could all study scripture together."

"S-scripture?"

It was a surprise attack, so her voice may have betrayed her. However the girl with the French braids didn't notice Noriko's reaction, instead crooking her neck slightly and smiling.

"How about it?"

"Well ... ah, I'm sorry. There's something I have to do today."

After she said this, Noriko thought, "There wasn't a better way of turning her down? Something that would stop her from asking again tomorrow."

"Really? That's a shame."

Thankfully, she withdrew without any further objection. A club for reading bible scriptures sounded totally unappealing.

"I'm sorry, especially since you went out of your way to invite me. Gokigenyou."

Noriko grabbed her bag and sped out of the classroom.

If she waited around, she'd just get invited to another club, and that would be a pain. She should change out of her indoor shoes, or at least get out of the school building. Now then, what to do?

She'd used "things she had to do" as an excuse for declining the invitation to attend the scripture club, but there was no real reason for her to hurry home.

(Maybe I should take the long way home.)

She could go home straight away, but she'd hit the peak for club-free students heading home. The bus that looped between the main gate and the railway station would be pretty crowded. Even though it'd be comprised mostly of middle- and high-school students from Lillian's Girls Academy, she still wanted to avoid the rush.

Things would be a lot different if she left it 30 minutes. Noriko decided to kill some time.

But having said that, it hadn't been that long since she'd entered into this school. She still didn't fully understand where all the paths led. Since Lillian's Girls Academy covered from kindergarten to university all on the one campus, the campus itself was quite large.

If she'd been here since kindergarten, this would probably be just like her own backyard, but for someone who'd only newly arrived, accidentally wandering out of their territory would be like getting lost in the woods without a compass and canteen. There was wisdom in not venturing too far.

(Having said that.)

She had no purpose. She'd probably run into one of the sports clubs if she strayed onto an oval. The bible scripture club was obviously out of the

question, but Noriko didn't plan to join any other extra-curricular groups either.

She'd been carried into high-school by momentum. Given that, she'd come to the decision that this place was just for learning and she'd set her sights on the university entrance exams in three years' time.

It wasn't as though the once in twenty years choice had ruined her life. If she studied hard, she could be back on track in three years.

Avoiding the sports grounds, she walked along the path that led to the auditorium. Plenty of flower petals were falling from the cherry trees planted along the rear of the school building. To Noriko's eyes, the roughly one-third of flowers that remained on the branches seemed like they were clinging to the past.

(That reminds me.)

She suddenly remembered. What about that cherry tree?

Behind the auditorium, there was a single cherry tree mixed in with the ginkgo trees.

On the day of the entrance ceremony, after confirming which class she was in from the list posted in front of the auditorium she headed back towards the school building. It was then that she caught sight of its semi-fluorescence, and was oddly charmed by it.

Why was it that only that cherry tree was that pretty?

"I guess it'll have dropped most of its flowers too."

From looking around, that was the obvious conclusion to draw.

But Noriko felt an odd confidence. That she'd definitely make it in time.

That cherry tree was somehow different to the others.

It was divine, it was as sublimely beautiful as a Shinto shrine's sacred tree.

She turned towards the auditorium and broke into a jog. The cherry trees were gradually replaced with ginkgo trees.

When she finally reached the auditorium wall, Noriko noticed a scattering of light pink flower petals on the ground.

Searching back through her memories, she turned the corner of the building. The petals underfoot steadily increased.

It should be just around the next corner. As though it were a signpost, a single branch protruded into her field of vision.

(... There!)

Turning the corner.

Noriko's breath was instantly taken away.

"—"

Standing alone among the grove of ginkgo trees with their fresh yellow-green sprouts, the single Yoshino cherry tree was in full bloom at the moment and resplendent with flowers.

Standing beneath it was Maria-sama.

There was no stirring of her body as she watched the petals gently falling in the slight breeze, like powdered snow.

Noriko had heard plenty of stories of bodies being buried beneath cherry trees, but this was the first she'd heard of Maria-sama standing beneath them.

Still, what a beautiful scene.

There were no words to express it.

Eventually Maria-sama noticed Noriko's gaze, gracefully turned around and said:

"Gokigenyou."

"... G-gokigenyou."

Instinctively, Noriko stammered out a greeting.

On closer inspection, it was a human girl wearing the same uniform as her. But her skin was translucently pale and she had an unearthly beauty.

The atmosphere made Noriko's delusion, that the statue of Maria-sama had taken the wrong path at the fork in the road and wandered off from her small forest, seem entirely plausible.

"This cherry tree is lovely, isn't it?"

The girl smiled wholeheartedly.

With her feminine features and her wavy hair like cotton-candy, the uniform suited her better than anyone else Noriko had seen. What she was wearing looked less like a uniform and more like a going-out dress for an antique blue-eyed doll.

(I wonder if the uniform was designed for people like her.)

Sadly, in Noriko's case, as a doll she had the features of a traditional Japanese doll. So, she was more like a Rokumeikan lady, being forced into a dress.

"Today's the last day for best viewing of this cherry tree. It seemed such a shame that I was the only one to appreciate it, so I'm glad to see another visitor."

As she said this, the human Maria-sama softly stroked the tree trunk.

Noriko thought she must be an older student, given her manner of speaking and her composed bearing.

"I wonder if perhaps this cherry tree was so beautiful that you forgot."

"Huh?"

Noriko had no idea what the girl was talking about. Noriko's voice sounded shrill and nervous and the girl responded with, "How to speak."

"... I've just remembered."

"What a relief. I was worried that we wouldn't be able to converse, despite being here together."

After a short silence, the pair laughed quietly in the light-pink powdered snow.

"Um, have you been coming here every day?"

"Yes. While it has been blossoming. The cherry tree invites me."

"It invites you?"

"Yes, it invites me. Didn't you come here because you were invited too?"

Noriko thought that this was right on the mark.

Indeed. It had invited her. It was the cherry tree's invitation that led to her being here now.

"All cherry trees are lovely. Breathtakingly so, when they're in full bloom, coloring the world with light-pink snow. But none of them have the same attraction as this tree."

She sounded like she was talking to herself as she looked up at the branches of the cherry tree.

"I wonder why that is."

"Because it's blooming so beautifully even though it's all on its own ... ?"

Noriko said what came to mind, without thinking about it too deeply.

The girl seemed slightly surprised by Noriko's utterance, but then she nodded saying, "I see."

"You're right. It's just like you said."

After that, they stood for a while beneath the falling cherry blossoms.

Neither said a word, but it wasn't awkward.

Watching the cherry blossoms like that felt incredibly comfortable for some reason.

The tree generously scattered its petals, as though it had been awaiting Noriko's arrival.

Flutter, flutter.



What was the girl beside her thinking – Just as Noriko thought this, the girl with the fine features that resembled Maria-sama turned towards her.

"What time is it?"

"It's 4 ... 5 to 4."

"Really? Then I'll have to be going."

She said there was some sort of meeting she had to attend, as she brushed away the petals that had landed on her shoulders.

"Um, they're in your hair too."

"Ah, you're right."

She said, "Could you please?" and turned away. A short distance away from the cherry tree, Noriko picked the petals from her hair one by one.

Her fluffy hair was just as soft as it looked. Noriko caught a glimpse of the white nape of her neck in her wide open sailor collar, and even for a girl, it was startlingly captivating.

"Hardly anyone comes by the back of the auditorium, right? It makes it hard to keep track of time. I left my watch in the classroom before I came here, so you've saved me."

As they walked together, the girl showed some interest in the bob-haired young lady beside her.

"Are you a first-year?"

"Yes."

"I see. I'm a second-year, so we share the same school building."

When they'd made it to the main entrance of the auditorium, the girl said, "I'll leave you here," and turned away.

Noriko felt like she was in a dream as she stood there, watching the girl walk towards the school building. Somehow, it was already hard to see her go.

After going about ten metres, the girl that looked like Maria-sama suddenly stopped, turned around and said:

"Let's meet again."

Noriko felt as though she'd been waiting for just those words.

Part 4.

"I'm home."

When she unlocked the door and stepped inside, a voice from further in called out, "Welcome home."

"Oh, you're home, Sumireko-san?"

"I only just got back."

Noriko approached the owner of the apartment, who was sprawled out on the sofa with her feet up on the living room table. Her stockings were balled up on the carpet, so it looked like she really did just return home. This was just a sample of what happens to prim and proper "Gokigenyou" saying young ladies after a few decades.

"I thought you were going shopping after the movie?"

Noriko picked up the discarded stockings and handed them to her, receiving the short response, "I changed my mind." The energy she'd had when she set out had disappeared somewhere.

"Are your feet sore from wearing unsuitable high-heels for someone your age?"

"You could have left off "for someone my age.""

"My apologies ... oh."

Noriko deftly blocked the flying stocking-ball with her school bag. Sumireko-san had insanely good aim when she was attacking someone.

"By the way, how old are you, Sumireko-san?"

Noriko knew she was fairly old, but still hadn't heard the official count. She didn't think her parents knew either.

"You're asking my age, even though we're both women?"

As she massaged her outstretched legs, Sumireko-san looked at Noriko with upturned eyes.

"It's okay, we're relatives."

"To the same degree as watered-down whiskey at a cheap bar."

Sumireko-san laughed. Implying that their blood relationship was very thin.

Nijou Sumireko, age unknown.

From Noriko's viewpoint, she was her father's father's (ie. her grandfather's) younger sister.

"So there's still people who look after their "watered-down whiskey" out of idle curiosity then."

Noriko glanced at her great-aunt.

"You don't need that much taking care of, right Riko?"

"You said it before, all you're doing is looking out for me."

"I wanted you to say, "Please do so." After all, I'm still your granny."

Sumireko-san laughed, her bright red lips matching her suit. She certainly didn't think of herself as a "granny."

(I'm no match for her ...)

It was Sumireko-san that forcibly suggested Noriko attend Lillian's. She was single and without children, so she at least wanted one of her relatives' daughters to attend her alma mater. The only question remaining was had she enjoyed Lillian's all that much? But setting that aside, Noriko's father's siblings were all boys, so it had taken quite some time until Sumireko-san's meager machinations could take shape.

Unbeknownst to her parents, Noriko had used the money set aside for the entrance exam fees for schools other than her first-choice to pay for the trip to Kyoto. But for better or worse she wasn't able to embezzle the money for Lillian's, since it was being handled by Sumireko-san. So even though she didn't think she'd fail the public-school entrance exam, Noriko had sat the Lillian's exam to allow Sumireko-san to save face. That things turned out the way they did was unimaginable.

So, to Noriko, Sumireko-san was a benefactor. If she hadn't sat the Lillian's entrance exam, Noriko would currently be without a high-school, which would have been much worse.

(Should I give her a shoulder rub later?)

Noriko decided that she should go to her room for the time being, but just as she was sliding the door she was stopped from behind by, "Riko."

"I bought a chiffon cake from Maple Parlor, so let's have tea. Hurry up and change out of your uniform."

Not waiting for a reply, Sumireko-san walked to the kitchen.

That she hadn't commented on the sounds Sumireko-san made as she got up was proof of Noriko's modest friendship.

The Japanese-style six tatami-mat sized room to the east of the living room was currently Noriko's fortress.

It wasn't some convoluted family situation that led her to be living with her distantly related granny.

They'd decided to rent Sumireko-san's room for the three-years that Noriko would be in high-school. It was a long way to commute every day to Lillian's Girls Academy from her family's home in Chiba. And while she had thought about living alone, apparently that wasn't permitted by the school for young ladies.

She could live at a girls dormitory, or with a blood relative. Presented with this choice, she chose the latter option. Living with Sumireko-san was somewhat easier than dealing with the curfews and duty roster involved in a dormitory.

Incidentally, the house in Chiba with her completely normal parents and middle-school sister was quite lively.

"Now then."

Entering her room, Noriko switched on the computer.

It had become her custom to take her uniform off with the beeps, rumbles and clicks of the computer as background music. She easily worked the mouse and keyboard as she changed, printing out the email that had arrived.

She probably should have checked the contents before printing it, but the sender was one of her fellow Buddhist statue admirers, so she knew

without looking that it was going to be about Buddhist statues. When it came to that topic, she couldn't overlook any kind of information. She'd underline the important details, then file the mail away neatly.

"I wonder if Takuya-kun's better now"

As she put on her T-shirt, Noriko cast an eye over the printed email.

<< I know it's a bit late, but let me start by offering my congratulations on your entry into high-school. How is your new life treating you? >>

"Thank-you. The "Reverse Hidden Christian" has a thrilling daily life."

Despite the one-way nature of email, Noriko had the bad habit of voicing her response as she read. Naturally, she bowed when she was talking over the phone too.

<< I was surprised by how much you've changed while I was in hospital, Nori-chan. >>

"I suddenly sprung up in Tokyo."

She balled up her threefold socks and threw them at the basket in her closet. Strike.

<< But that's just like you. If I hadn't broken my leg skiing, I probably would have done all I could to see the Tamamushi Kannon statue too. >>

"Everyone told me I was an idiot. That the Kannon statue was once in twenty years, but high-school entrance exams were once in a lifetime. But I don't regret it ... My Tamamushi Kannon!"

Noriko picked up one of the photo-albums stacked on the tatami mat floor and hugged it tightly. She thought she should study hard and get into a top university to restore the honor of the Tamamushi Kannon.

<< By the way, have you paid a visit to the Shouguu temple in District H while you've been living in Tokyo? If not, then I really would recommend you check it out. The temple houses a statue of Maitreya by your favorite sculptor, Yuukai. >>

When she read that, Noriko unthinkingly stood up and shouted:

"A Yuukai Maitreya!"

She couldn't believe her eyes, so she read the section again.

Shouguu temple – Maitreya – Yuukai. – There was no mistake.

"For Yuukai, who specialized in Acala and Kongorishiki statues, to have sculpted a Maitreya ... !"

She had to go and see it. Her Buddhist statue loving spirit was welling up inside her.

Then, just at that moment, Noriko had her wings firmly clipped from behind.

"Riko. I thought I told you to hurry up and change."

"Gah, Sumireko-san."

"Don't take Maple Parlor's chiffon cake lightly or you'll be sorry – "

A reproachful voice right next to her ear.

"Ah, yeah yeah."

"What are you reading that you didn't even notice when I came into your room?"

Sumireko-san stepped back from Noriko, and took a long look at what she held in her hands.

"Nothing. It's just a letter."

To avoid further complications, Noriko put the letter face down on her desk.

"Hmm. A love letter?"

"As if."

"That's for sure. If you had a boyfriend you'd be going out on dates, not visiting temples."

Sumireko-san snorted, then left the room, saying, "The tea's getting cold."

"I hate to break it to you, but if I did have someone I loved, we'd visit temples together."

Noriko stuck her tongue out at the back of her great-aunt. Then she switched off her computer and was lured into the living room by the sweet scent of Darjeeling tea.

Maria and Maitreya

Part 1.

"The Maria Ceremony?"

"Right, the Maria Ceremony."

Touko-san nodded, her left and right ringlet curls bouncing like springs.

"Noriko-san, you're not that well acquainted with the events at Lillian's Girls Academy, are you?"

"Not at all acquainted would be close to the truth."

Noriko looked up from the paperback she was reading. Then Touko-san said, "That's for sure," and cheekily sat down at the desk in front of her.

It was recess. The seat's owner had fortunately stepped outside.

"I've made up my mind. I'll help you out until you've become accustomed to this school, Noriko-san."

"Huh."

"So as my first task, I shall explain about the Maria ceremony that will take place two weeks hence."

Before Noriko could turn her down with, "It's alright, you don't have to," Touko-san had snatched away her paperback, put the bookmark in place, then set it down in a corner of the desk. Quite presumptuous of her.

(Oh boy.)

As someone who came into the school via the entrance exam, Noriko's classmates had been offering her their assistance since the start of the school year. She'd taken to reading as a counter to this, but it looked to be completely ineffective.

Suspicious as she was, she thought that the offers were made with the best intentions. On the other hand, if this was what passed for harassment here then she could handle it.

"Alright. Please explain it to me then."

With the shield of her book taken from her, Noriko had no choice but to engage in conversation. She'd let a sigh slip in with her words, and Touko-san's cheeks puffed up.

"Noriko-san, that troubled face is hurtful. Especially since Touko's thinking about you."

"I didn't ask you to think about me so you can stop ... huh!?"

Noriko recoiled. Why was the girl in front of her pouting and getting teary eyed?

"H-hold on a minute."

In truth, she was incredibly flustered.

Noriko had been tossed around in the stormy seas of peer interaction during her time at a co-ed public middle-school, but not once had she encountered a situation like this. It was unthinkable that she would make a girl cry.

"Crying at school, isn't that something that stops in elementary school?"

"Who ever decided that?"

Touko-san mumbled as she quietly sobbed, hiding her face with her hands.

"If I want to cry, and I've done all I can to endure it, why shouldn't I cry?"

"Well, that's true but – "

Crying in a place like this, she'd be publicly humiliated. Noriko stood up, put her arm around Touko-san's shoulder and walked her out to the hallway.

They went out the emergency exit and Noriko spread out a handkerchief on the steel staircase and sat Touko-san down on it.

"That's the only handkerchief I have."

Touko-san nodded at her words, then took a floral handkerchief out of her own pocket and dried her tears with it.

"Why would something like that make you cry ... "

Even as she was amazed, Noriko was a little bit jealous. It was proof that Touko-san could show her emotions, whether laughing or crying, without worrying about other people's opinions.

She was probably a darling little girl. That's what Noriko thought. Now that she was thinking about it, Noriko couldn't remember the last time she cried.

"I'm sorry I made you cry."

Noriko gently put her hand on the shoulder of the sniffling girl.

"No, it's Touko's fault."

"You were going to tell me about the Maria Ceremony?"

At which point Touko-san's expression suddenly brightened. This girl was a crow, huh. Not just from the color of her uniform, but the way she'd been crying – that's the sort of person she was.

"So about the Maria Ceremony."

According to Touko-san:

The Maria Ceremony was held in the middle of May and was peculiar to Lillian's, so it didn't seem to be a standard event for devout Catholics. Touko-san, who had been at Lillian's since kindergarten, was of the opinion that the celebration of the Holy Mother was timed to coincide with Mother's Day.

"Even though I called it a celebration, there's no stalls or anything like that."

"Aha."

"But we decorate the school's statues of Maria-sama with flowers. And there's no classes, instead we have mass."

Touko-san happily counted on her fingers as she continued to explain. How everyone tried to catch a glimpse of the kindergarteners as they paraded to the high-school building dressed up as angels. Well, even someone as ignorant of Catholicism as Noriko could easily see how that would be a charming sight.

"Plus there's something for us first-year high-school students to look forward to after the mass. The onee-samas of the student council hold a ceremony to welcome the first-years."

"A welcoming ceremony?"

"The Yamayurikai welcome us as their new younger sisters."

"... The Yamayurikai."

"Come on, you can't have forgotten that, Noriko-san. It's the name of the high-school student council."

It felt like she may have heard that before, at the entrance ceremony or on the second day of school. But since more than half of the first-years had come through Lillian's middle-school the explanation probably would have been covered quickly. And since Noriko wasn't all that interested in school life even though she came from another school, she shared that view.

Still, just the mass was depressing enough, but then there was another event after it.

"I'd rather have classes ... "

The words slipped out of her mouth.

"Again you say something outrageous, Noriko-san. Ah, if the rumors are true – "

Touko-san leaned over the edge of the emergency staircase and looked down. Noriko followed her gaze to where a group of students were walking through the courtyard towards the school building.

"They're the Yamayurikai executive members. From the front, it's Rosa Chinensis, Rosa Foetida and finally Rosa Gigantea."

"Rosa ... "

"Rosa Chinensis, Rosa Foetida, Rosa Gigantea."

Those tongue-twisters were apparently the traditional names given to the members of the high-school student council leaders. Red paper roll, blue paper roll, yellow paper roll – there were some unfathomable things at girls' schools.

"They've been doing Yamayurikai work during the lunch break."

The girl with the ringlet curls seemed to be in such rapt adoration that she probably wouldn't have noticed Noriko's surprise.

(That's ... !)

Noriko's gaze was fixed on the student walking third in line.

The person that Touko-san had called Rosa Gigantea was the Maria-sama that had been standing beneath the cherry tree.

Part 2.

Just before noon on the following Sunday, Noriko was aboard a train headed to District H.

She closed her eyes, her body nestled in a gently swaying seat. While there were some tourists, the outbound trains were largely deserted, so no-one had to stand.

The sunlight streaming through the window gently warmed the shoulders of her cardigan. As Noriko sunk most of her money into her hobby, she didn't have a large wardrobe to choose from. Consequently, her standard outfit of late was a red checkered dress that had been bought for her last year and a plain cardigan.

Click, clack. Click, clack.

She had brought a book to read, but she didn't feel like keeping her eyes open. Even if she forced herself to turn the pages, there was no way the words would penetrate her head. It wouldn't be all that different to reading a book written in Spanish or Chinese.

Click, clack. Click, clack.

Even with her eyes closed, she could tell she was getting closer to the countryside. There was probably a mountain not that far away. It could have been the smell telling her this, or the air temperature, or maybe it was simply speculation with nothing at all to back it up. From the changes in sunlight, she felt as though she'd passed through a number of woods.

She got up from her seat when the train announcer indicated they were arriving at her destination.

Noriko was definitely close to Shouguu Temple.

"A cheeseburger meal, please. Oolong tea for the drink."

Noriko stuffed her face with a hamburger at a fast food restaurant near the train station. Looking at her watch, it was just past noon.

She could see the bus terminal through the glass front of the store. That was where she'd catch a bus. But since it would be rude to visit at lunch time, Noriko decided to rest here for a little while longer.

Now that she had a chance to relax, she suddenly found herself getting excited.

(I'm going to see a Yuukai Maitreya ... !)

She'd found it hard to get to sleep last night, a bit like she was going to meet a pop idol. She'd exchanged a couple of emails with Takuya-kun before the big day arrived. Since his broken leg was nowhere near completely healed, he was unable to indulge in his hobby of visiting temples, but at least by assisting Noriko he seemed to feel some slight connection to Buddhist statues.

Sumireko-san had teased her, saying that he fancied her, but it wasn't that kind of relationship. It was like being in one of those groups that were really into reenacting Edo period society. They had similar tastes.

(But.)

His groundwork was usually good, and it looked as though his preparations were still fine despite the injury.

Takuya-kun hadn't just worked out the route for her, he'd also contacted Shouguu Temple and received permission for her to view the Buddhist statue, all before Noriko had done a thing. She really was completely indebted to him. It was great having someone that shared her hobby.

Since he'd done so much work for her, Yuukai's Maitreya must be absolutely incredible.

(Oh no.)

After a short reprieve, her excitement was building again.

The feeling had risen to the point where it was now like "finally arriving at the venue for the pop idol's concert."

(Calm down, calm down.)

She told herself, placing a hand over her heart. She'd lose everything if she got sick at this point. She would just die if she collapsed on the way to

viewing a Buddhist statue. Even someone who could laugh off missing out on the entrance exams wouldn't be able to laugh at that.

"Huh ... ?"

Noriko raised her head, suddenly realizing she'd just seen someone she knew walk past, on the other side of the fast food restaurant's glass storefront.

"That was ... "

Noriko stood up and leaned forward, but she couldn't confirm what she'd seen.

"No, it can't have been."

Noriko sipped her remaining oolong tea. In the distance, they'd been wearing a plain kimono when she saw them from behind.

It must have been someone else. – Noriko sat down once again.

Running into her in a place like this. That sort of coincidence just didn't happen.

Part 3.

Despite its name, the Shouguu Temple was apparently a **gargantuan place**.

At any rate, it was large and permanent enough to have bus routes traveling to "Shouguu Temple – North" and "Shouguu Temple – Central."

"Number 7, number 7 ... ah, here it is."

After checking the piece of paper with Takuya-kun's notes, she boarded the Number 7 bus headed to "Shouguu Temple – Central."

The bus was surprisingly empty. While the Shouguu Temple certainly wasn't as famous as the temples of Kyoto or Nara, there didn't seem to be any tourists heading there even though it was Sunday.

After fifteen minutes of gazing at tranquil scenery the bus arrived at the temple, which was spread out across a large plot of land situated in front of a moderately sized mountain. From the weathering of the temple gate, she could surmise that it was quite an old temple.

As she passed through the gate, Noriko called out to a temple worker who was sweeping the path, informing him of her name. He'd apparently been told to expect her, because he obediently ushered her in.

Noriko was led to the main temple building, and she let out a sigh when she sat on the tatami mat floor.

(Thank-you Takuya-kun!)

While you could have a look inside tourist temples just by paying the entrance fee, it was usually quite difficult to get inside normal temples.

The temple worker said the chief priest would see her, then left for about five minutes. While it certainly wasn't a long time to wait, Noriko couldn't help but get fidgety being left alone in the splendid temple building.

Finally, standing up, she walked over and stood in front of the principal image of the temple.

"Amitabha Tathagata ..."

From within the gloomy temple building, the dazzling golden statue of Amitabha Tathagata rose to the surface. Right hand elevated from the elbow,

the fingers making a symbolic gesture, the left hand motioning towards the lotus flowers beneath. Since the figure was flanked on the left and right by Kannon and Seishi, it appeared to be the Amitabha triumvirate.

The gold-leaf was peeling off in places, but that just emphasized the sense of age.

"Incredible ... "

While she had been attracted here by Maitreya, Noriko found the principal image, which was about 2 metres tall including the pedestal, completely captivating.

"Does it please you?"

Noriko turned when she heard the voice and saw a middle-aged priest in monk's robes standing there smiling. He must be the temple's chief priest.

"You are, I presume, Nijou Noriko-san?"

"Ah, yes."

Noriko straightened her back and answered. Standing to attention. She didn't even stand like this during gym class.

Calm down, Noriko. She repeated this command in her mind. Standing before her was a human, not Maitreya.

"I see. You're ... "

The chief priest tapped his smooth head and then let out a single, "Ha."

"Oh, sorry. Shimura-san told me you were a lady, but I didn't think you'd be so young. From your appearance, it doesn't look like you're one of his university friends."

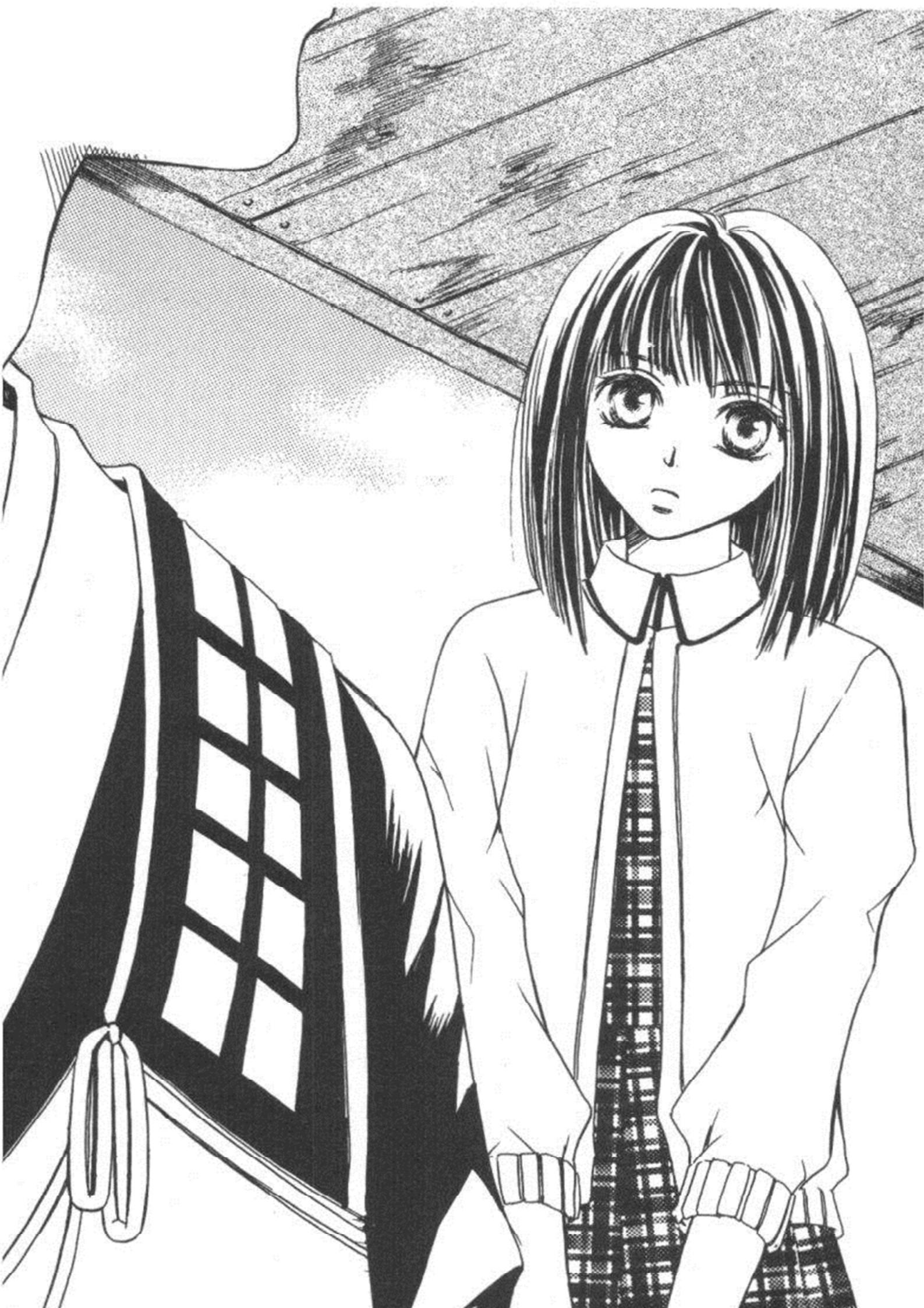
"My apologies. Shimura-san and I share the same hobby."

Shimura was Takuya-kun's surname.

"Ah, that's right. You came to see the Maitreya, didn't you? It's not in the temple, it's at the house. Please, follow me."

The chief priest said, then turned and started walking. Apparently he found it incredibly amusing that this young girl in her teens had the hobby of viewing Buddhist statues, because from time to time his shoulders would shake with suppressed laughter, as though remembering this.

"Um, did Yuukai really sculpt it?"



As they walked down the corridor, Noriko asked the question that had been bothering her. The chief priest then stopped and turned to face her.

"That's how it's been handed down, but that doesn't really matter, right?"

"Doesn't really matter?"

"... To people in general. It matters a great deal to scholars and appraisers. But you just came to view it, right?"

Regardless of who made it, something good was good. On the flip side, even a famous sculptor could create a Buddhist statue with no soul. – That was what the chief priest was saying.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes."

Noriko nodded.

"You're saying that when viewing a statue, I shouldn't consider extraneous matters. Is that right?"

"Exactly."

He smiled, looking satisfied, then resumed walking along the black timber hallway.

The chief priest's house was connected to the temple by a hallway. The inside was as large as she'd expected based on the outward appearance, and there seemed to be a number of people working in both the temple and house.

Noriko was ushered into a Japanese-style room where an attractive kimono-clad middle-aged lady brought her tea. From her bearing and the way she spoke, Noriko could tell that this was the chief priest's wife.

"Hey, what's Shimako up to?"

"She went to the train station on an errand earlier, but she returned a little while ago."

"Then call her over. I have to give a sutra reading at Muranishi-san's house."

"That's right."

"Um ... "

Noriko couldn't follow the conversation he was carrying out with his wife.

"Quickly now."

After he said this, his wife left the room immediately. Presumably, Shimako was their daughter and the chief priest intended to leave Noriko in her care.

Less than a minute later, a young woman's voice called out, "Father, I've brought the Maitreya statue," from the corridor, then slowly opened the sliding screen.

She was dressed in a kimono, just like her mother, with her eyes on the ground as she entered the room carrying a wooden box and then she bowed deeply.

"I'm Shimako."

"Ah, I'm Noriko."

Terrible as it may be, she'd unintentionally introduced herself with her first name – a bad habit she'd picked up at school. A portion of her usually depressing school life had reared its head in a strange situation. Less than a month in and she was already indelibly stained by it. Usually when meeting someone for the first time, she would introduce herself with her surname.

"... ?"

As expected, because of Noriko's puzzling behavior, the other girl slowly raised her head.

The moment their eyes met, they both caught their breath at roughly the same time. That neither let out an audible gasp was remarkable.

(What's she doing here!?)

Between them, an invisible cherry blossom blizzard whirled. No, rose petals seemed more appropriate in this situation.

– Because the person that had appeared in front of Noriko was the Maria-sama statue's exact double, "Rosa Gigantea."

Part 4.

The chief priest left the room, saying, "I'll leave you young people alone," which was the sort of line you'd expect to hear from an arranged marriage match-maker.

Now, the trouble was with those "young people" that had been left alone.

After the sound of the sliding screen closing came a brief period of uncomfortable silence. Because the next words and actions would have a profound effect on their relationship from here on. Unfortunately, Noriko had never been involved in an arranged marriage interview, but she had seen one in a TV drama. In that instance, the heroine had invited her partner to a splendid Japanese-style garden. Come to think of it, this temple had a nice garden too.

Unfortunately, the chief priest's daughter Shimako-san was not her partner in an arranged marriage interview, so Noriko couldn't use a cliched phrase like, "Shall we take a stroll in the garden?"

After a deep breath that was almost a sigh, Shimako-san regained her composure and placed the wooden box she was carrying on top of the table.

"Yuukai's statue of Maitreya – "

She unraveled the cord that was binding the box along its length and breadth.

"is not connected to the Shouguu Temple, but has been passed down in our family for generations."

"I see."

Even as she replied, Noriko's gaze shifted from the fingertips, to the arms, and then up to the face of the girl in front of her.

(There's no doubt about it.)

Wearing a plain kimono, her hair collected in a loose ponytail behind her. She looked a couple of years older than when she was wearing her school uniform. But she was definitely the same girl that Noriko had exchanged words with beneath the cherry tree.

"So its existence isn't widely known, and we don't usually allow viewings without a referral."

She took the statue from the wooden box, turned it to face Noriko and said, "Go ahead."

"— It's."

A sound came from Noriko's throat.

Such a mercenary. Until just now she'd been interested in this person named "Shimako," but the Maitreya statue consumed all her attention the moment it was presented to her.

It was the nature of a Buddhist statue enthusiast.

Because of that, she looked at Yuukai's statue of Maitreya as though she were in a dream.

"—"

It wasn't that large. At an estimate, it was about 25cm tall. The entire thing was rough-hewn, and the characteristic dark color of ancient dried wood combined with the expression on the face made for an incredibly simple half-lotus statue.

"Lovely ... It's like my soul's being cleansed ... "

She felt like she understood the words of the chief priest in her heart, and not just in her head.

It wasn't a question of whether it was sculpted by Yuukai or not. No matter who made it, she would have been just as moved by this statue.

There was no doubt that Buddha dwelled in there.

"I see. That's definitive proof that your soul is pure."

Shimako-san said quietly, all smiles, her voice like limpid water.

"I'm glad I was allowed to view this."

Part 5.

The shoes which she'd left at the temple entrance had at some point been transferred to the house's entry.

Noriko put her shoes on, then:

"I'll take her to the bus stop."

Shimako-san informed the female assistant who seemed to have that job, then put on a pair of zori sandals.

"Ah, you don't have to go the trouble."

"But it's a different bus stop to the one you arrived at."

Hearing this, Noriko couldn't refuse her offer. So she bowed her head and asked Shimako-san to guide her.

The temple just looked like a big house from this side. The plain nameplate hung from the door established that Shimako-san's surname was "Toudou."

Not a word was spoken as they walked along the narrow street leading to the bus stop. There was an ancient moss-covered wall that continued along the roadside far into the distance. The street itself was wide enough that a single car could easily travel along it, but there wasn't a lot of room for two cars to pass each other on the downward sloping hill, which may have been the reason that the main entrance wasn't on this street. The area was thick with trees towering over the wall, as well as lots of bamboo thickets.

Perhaps that was why the street had the smell of greenery, like after an evening shower.

Silence.

But, like the time they had both looked up at the cherry tree, it wasn't something to be content with.

It wasn't that nothing needed to be said, but despite needing to say something Noriko couldn't find the words. It was an oppressive silence.

"You're not going to ask, I see."

"Huh?"

Shimako-san had been the first one to speak.

"About the contradiction inherent in me, the daughter of a Buddhist priest, attending the Catholic Lillian's Girls Academy."

"Um ... "

She'd wanted to ask, but hadn't known whether it would be okay to do so. And if that was a contradiction then the same applied to Noriko herself, since she had come here to view a Buddhist statue while also a student at Lillian's.

Perhaps mindful of Noriko's reticence, Shimako-san changed her line of questioning.

"What did you want to be when you were in elementary school, Noriko-san?"

"What, like an occupation?"

Thinking she was saying something astonishing, Noriko answered, "Buddhist statue maker." Shimako-san responded with, "That's unusual," and let a small smile shine through.

Noriko had no idea what passed for popular aspirational occupations these days, but she seemed to remember her classmates had said florist, or kindergarten teacher, or TV star. At any rate, she'd never met another girl who wanted to be a Buddhist statue maker.

" – As for me, I wanted to be a nun. Ever since I was really young."

Shimako-san said quietly.

"A nun?"

"You can laugh, it's okay."

While Noriko had been prepared for laughter in response to her answer, the atmosphere made it impossible to laugh.

But still, a nun. Just like a Buddhist statue maker, it seemed to be a fairly unusual choice.

"Perhaps it was a reaction. The daughter of a Buddhist priest becoming a nun."

Shimako-san said unemotionally, her eyes downcast, as they walked together.

"There was an innocence to it when I was young. But gradually I became old enough to understand what was going on around me. When that happened, I started to see my future dream as something I couldn't speak of."

"But it's your family that has the temple."

Religious freedom and freedom of occupation should be protected by the Japanese constitution.

"Religion goes to the very core of your being, so it's quite complicated. Especially since ours is an old temple."

Religion was supposed to be something that saved people's souls. But it had also caused wars in the past. In reality, while religious persecution was primarily done for political power, society at large did discriminate against those who believed in different creeds.

– Hidden Christian.

This thought popped into Noriko's mind. It wasn't that long ago that Japan lacked religious freedom. It was less than 150 years since the country had opened up and the prohibition on Christianity was lifted.

150 years ago. Sumireko-san's grandmother would have been alive then. It was recent enough that you could imagine what it was like.

Although you could also say that 150 years was long enough for society's attitudes to change. Maybe it was a problem that wouldn't have to be addressed again in the future.

Shimako-san probably knew this from experience, since she'd been born into a temple family. That's why she restrained herself.

"But it didn't work."

Shimako-san raised her head, looking up at the heavens.

"When I tried to restrain it, it just made my yearning for Catholicism grow stronger. Then, when I was in sixth-grade of elementary school, I finally told my father."

"What happened?"

Noriko pressed for more. She was anxious to find out the result, like she was reading a mystery novel.

"I told him I wanted to enter into a convent when I was 12, and that he should disown me."

"Wha!?"

"Then my parents panicked and started trying to persuade me. Oh, was it really that strange?"

"Shimako-san, you may be a far more astounding person than you appear ... "

No matter how much she longed for it, a 12 year old wouldn't usually have that level of determination. It wasn't like sumo wrestling or the entertainment business, where the earlier she started the better.

"Then my father said, "There's a lot you still don't know about religion. You should go to a Catholic school, then make up your mind after studying it properly.***"

"So that's why you're at Lillian's ... "

Shimako-san gave a small nod of confirmation.

"I think my father is right when he says that a determination that yields to persuasion is an insult to those who carry it. But I didn't have the passion to enforce my opinion over their opposition, nor the strength to cast aside my own parents. That's all it was."

Noriko didn't think it was a question of passion or strength. Simply that Shimako-san was serious about filial piety. She accepted her parents' persuasion so that her desire for disinheritance wouldn't cause a problem for them. It wasn't indecisiveness. It was a manifestation of Shimako-san's gentle nature.

The bus stop came into view as soon as they entered onto the main road.

After walking the short distance, the pair naturally sat down on the bench at the bus stop. The names of ice-creams and soft-drinks being advertised on the back of the bench had been worn away to the point they were barely legible, and the retro plastic bench blended seamlessly with the

surrounding greenery giving the area the complete impression of a rural bus stop. When Shimako-san sat down wearing her plain kimono, not often worn by teenage girls, it once again gave a different impression.

There was no-one waiting at the bus stop ahead of them, nor did anyone arrive after them.

"There was one senior, since graduated, who knew about this."

Shimako-san said.

"Now there's no-one else. You're the only student at Lillian's that knows."

"You're keeping it hidden?"

"Yes, it's a promise I made with my father. Both at school and outside, I'm to hide the fact that I, the daughter of the chief priest of Shouguu Temple, attend a Catholic school ... It's a large temple, so if the parishioners who support the temple found out it could cause trouble."

Then she muttered, "Even if it is false testimony."

"But while my religion is important to me, I love my father too."

After she said this, Shimako-san took a deep breath. Then she turned to Noriko and smiled.

"I feel a lot better now. Like I've confessed my crimes and am now seeking forgiveness."

"But, I can't ... "

Noriko wasn't a minister who could hear confession, and obviously she wasn't God either. She was just another lamb that was equally as lost as, no, even more lost than Shimako-san.

"Just listening was enough. I'm not asking anything of you."

Shimako-san murmured, "Thank-you for listening," then lapsed into silence once more. She appeared to be thinking about something, but Noriko couldn't even guess at what that "something" was.

A bus appeared.

Destined for H Train Station. The bus Noriko was meant to get on.

"Well then."

Shimako-san stood up first. The bus steadily grew larger, heading towards them at full speed.

"Ah, um, what are you planning on doing, Shimako-san?"

Hearing the words Noriko blurted out, Shimako-san said, "Hmm?" and smiled lonesomely.

In front of them, the bus smoothly came to a halt. Just then, Noriko had a realization.

"Don't tell me you're going to stop coming to school!? ... Just because I found out!?"

The bus door opened. There was no-one getting off.

"Climb on board."

Noriko put her foot on the step at Shimako-san's urging. Once she'd boarded the bus, Noriko turned around and said:

"I won't say anything."

"Ah ... "

"Shimako-san, you won't tell me not to say anything because you don't want to involve me, right? But I'm already deceiving Maria-sama, although not as seriously as you. So what's one more thing?"

When the door closed, Noriko ran to the back seat, stuck her head out the open window and shouted out:

"Shimako-san!"

The bus started to move.

Shimako-san's surprised face grew further and further away. But Noriko believed that her feelings had been successfully conveyed.

Because she could see the small kimono-clad figure waving exuberantly.

As she was jostled by the clattering, empty bus, Noriko felt like she understood one thing. The reason why Shimako-san had been attracted to that cherry tree.

The single cherry tree standing amongst the gingko trees.

She must have been seeing herself repeated in that tree.

Rosary or Juzu

Part 1.

Monday.

Arriving at school slightly earlier than usual, Noriko went straight to that cherry tree. At the spot behind the auditorium.

She had a feeling that if she went there she would see Shimako-san. It felt like that was the only place they would meet.

"Gokigenyou."

They hadn't made any sort of arrangement, but there she was. Standing up from the tree trunk she had been leaning against, she quietly smiled at Noriko.

"I can't believe you're actually here ... "

Noriko said without thinking. It was a miracle.

"Then why did you come?"

"Why – "

Pretty much all the cherry blossom petals had already fallen from the tree. It was a bit hard to use the excuse that she came here for cherry blossom viewing.

"I wanted to see you."

Noriko said what was in her heart.

"Me too."

Shimako-san said, looking right into Noriko's eyes. Silence descended upon them and Noriko tried with all her might to find what to say.

"Um ... I've been thinking about it, and not saying anything isn't necessarily the same as telling a lie. On top of that, in your heart, you're a Christian, right Shimako-san? You can't do anything about the fact that you happened to be born into a family that runs a Buddhist temple. I don't think you're doing anything to betray God ... sorry, I can't put it into words all that well."

Shimako-san had been quietly listening, but at last she spoke, looking straight at Noriko.

"... You put it into words wonderfully."

"Ah, um ... "

Feeling embarrassed by being looked at, Noriko instinctively averted her eyes.

In truth, if she had been a statue of Buddha or Maria-sama and the eye contact was one-way traffic, how sublime would it have been to gaze upon her. But she was a real live human, and a peerless beauty at that, so it was a bit nerve-wracking. Even though they were both girls.

Noriko had panicked, thinking she had to say something. It would probably seem strange if she kept looking away and fidgeting.

(That's right.)

Noriko remembered she hadn't achieved her main goal, which was to persuade Shimako-san that she shouldn't quit school.

"I-I'm."

"Huh?"

"I'm a Buddhist statue enthusiast, but I'm still coming here."

What she'd blurted out may not have been all that sensible. But now that she'd started speaking she couldn't stop, and had no choice but to plow on ahead.

"I went to Kyoto to see a Buddhist statue on the day before my entrance exam, but a huge snowstorm stopped the bullet-train and I couldn't return home, so I lost my chance at my first-choice school. I used the money put aside for entrance exams to my backup schools on the trip, so the only option I had left was to accept entry into Lillian's, when I'd only sat that exam for the sake of my great-aunt's pride."

Fuwaah.

Shimako-san's face suddenly grew very close. Just as Noriko thought this, she felt Shimako-san's arms entwined around her neck.

"Huh ... !?"

It took a while for Noriko to realize she was being embraced.

"Thank-you. That's enough."

"Shimako-sa – "

"It's all right. I don't want to leave just yet. I was waiting here this morning because I wanted to tell you that."

"Really?"

Suddenly, all the strength drained from Noriko's body. So there was no need for her stupid speech, her self-important declaration.

"But."

Noriko pried herself away from Shimako-san and asked:

"Just now, you said "yet?""

She was just a little bit hung up on that.

"That's right. Things have returned to before I met you – to the way they were earlier. If it becomes public knowledge and that causes a problem, then I think I will have to leave this school after all."

"But Shimako-san, you like this school don't you?"

"Of course."

Shimako-san smiled fondly as she looked in the direction of the high-school building.

"I've come to like it more and more every day, even despite the troubles. Although that would have been unthinkable around this time last year."

"Then – "

"Even so, there's no point to coming here if it causes trouble for someone else. I can study Christianity anywhere, and follow the teachings of Jesus."

"Shimako-san ... "

It was like she was chasing herself away. Shimako-san seemed somehow pitiable, and Noriko felt her chest tighten.

"You can't be more carefree, I suppose."

"Carefree?"

While Shimako-san looked perplexed, the bell for class rang.

"But I never thought I'd be able to have a conversation like this at school."

"I'll be there for you whenever you want someone to talk to."

So you don't have to worry all by yourself – Noriko swallowed this last sentence.

"Shall we go?"

Shimako-san walked half a step ahead.

Somehow, a miraculous relationship was born.

Part 2.

It's about time we had a talk about school – that was what Sumireko-san had said.

"I suppose."

Noriko answered as she sipped her tea. At first glance Sumireko-san had been a bit slipshod in making the royal milk tea but, wonders never cease, it actually tasted quite good. You could probably say she'd mastered the skill. Her grandfather's family had a rather long pedigree, so perhaps Sumireko-san had been a proper lady back in her youth. Still able to remember the thousands of cups of tea she'd prepared for guests in salons or at tea parties.

"Yep. We haven't discussed school once since you started going there. Have you made any friends?"

"Friends? ... To the degree that I can talk to them during lunch or after school."

"What would you call them, if not friends?"

"Maybe you're right."

Noriko thought, "But she's older than me."

Sumireko-san was also older than her. So was Takuya-kun. Maybe she just got on well with older people.

She occasionally met Shimako-san beneath the cherry tree. They didn't arrange it. When they felt like it, their legs carried them there.

There had been times when they met, and times when they hadn't. But even when they didn't meet, Noriko hadn't felt disappointed. She knew that Shimako-san was busy because her commitments as Rosa Gigantea pulled at her, and the time Noriko spent waiting and thinking about her was surprisingly enjoyable.

Before she knew it, Noriko had become quite adept at spotting Shimako-san in a group of students. Whether in the hallway, or out on the campus, or in the courtyard, Noriko felt as though she could easily spot her, no matter how many students she was surrounded by.

Occasionally she wondered.

Just what was it that existed between the two of them?

Empathy?

(That's not it.)

Friendship?

(It seems like it has a slightly different nuance to that too.)

She liked Shimako-san. It felt comfortable being beside her.

But was that by itself enough? Was just being able to understand the other's feelings enough of a connection?

Recently, Noriko had been thinking that she wanted to do something for Shimako-san. But she had absolutely no idea what she could do.

"I don't know."

Noriko slumped over the table.

"Oh, fret, fret. Fretting over trivial things is the privilege of youth."

Sumireko-san laughed, holding out the box of chocolate truffles.

"Huh. How can you say it's trivial?"

"I don't know what it is you're worrying about, but look back on it in ten years."

"Ten years ... "

To someone who was currently 15 years old, ten years seemed like an absurdly long amount of time. Unlike a certain someone who had lived more than 4 times 15 years.

"Say, Sumireko-san. What if there was a devout Christian who thought that she was constantly betraying God as she lived? How do you think she could be helped?"

"What? Are you worrying about yourself?"

"I'm not a devout Christian."

"I see."

For some reason, Noriko thought it was okay to discuss this with Sumireko-san. Expecting some of that wisdom of the elderly.

"I don't really know. What if she came clean before God and asked for forgiveness?"

"Then it would turn into a big ordeal."

"Then what if she gave up Christianity?"

"Whoa, that's extreme."

"Otherwise, there's what I said earlier, "time." Time heals all wounds."

As she said this, Sumireko-san stood up and opened the refrigerator door.

" – or there could be some kind of brouhaha, I guess."

"Brouhaha?"

"Yep."

She rummaged around in the refrigerator before eventually returning with a small, plastic-wrap covered bowl.

"If there was some kind of brouhaha, then it would sort things out once and for all, for better or worse. Then you wouldn't have to worry about it."

"I see ... "

But she wasn't just about to stumble over something like that. And it went without saying that it wasn't something she'd be able to do herself –

"But, you know, Riko, if that's all you think about, it'll eat you up."

Sumireko-san returned to the table and slipped a piece of pickled daikon radish into Noriko's sweet with chocolate mouth.

Part 3.

"Noriko."

In the hallway leading to the home economics room, she stopped when she heard her name called.

It was alongside the second-year classrooms and Noriko looked around restlessly until the person who called out to her stepped out of the classroom.

"Ah, Shimako-san."

Touko and the other girls who had been walking with Noriko squealed when they saw who it was. Like fans who'd accidentally bumped into their favorite pop star.

"Do you have a moment?"

Noriko nodded, and Shimako walked her over to a quiet spot near the staircase. It had been quite some time since they'd talked face to face.

"I'm sorry, Noriko. I haven't been able to make it out to see you all that much ..."

For a while now, Shimako-san had been addressing Noriko by just her name, without an honorific. It just seemed so right that it felt like she'd been calling her that since the beginning.

"Don't worry about me. I know you're busy preparing for the Maria Ceremony. You're getting in early and staying back late, right? How's your body holding up?"

"I'm fine ... Thank-you."

Shimako-san's expression changed to one of relief. She'd probably called out to Noriko instinctively when she saw her, wanting to explain why they hadn't met.

(How conscientious of her. We hadn't arranged to meet, so she shouldn't feel bad about not making it there.)

Noriko thought, "Well, that's just like her though."

Shimako-san lowered her voice slightly.

"I was wondering, do you like juzu?"

"Juzu?"

"Yes. I remembered there was an image of Buddha in the juzu I inherited from my grandmother ... "

"Please, I'd love to see it!"

Noriko's voice suddenly grew louder the moment she heard the word Buddha. Shimako-san shushed her, then laughed quietly.

"I thought you'd say that. Wait for me at that spot tomorrow at lunch, please."

"Alright!"

Shimako-san said, "See you tomorrow," and then returned to her classroom. On her way back, she smiled sweetly at Touko-san and the other girls who had been watching them.

"Do you have sewing next period? What are you making?"

"Skirts. Rosa Gigantea."

"I see. I hope you all make wonderful skirts. Do your best."

"Y-yes!"

(Ahh ... It's incredible, even Touko-san's stuttering.)

The first-years looked like they were struck first by Shimako-san's gentle manner and then by her friendliness. Noriko sometimes forgot about it, but at times like this she remembered.

That Shimako-san was Lillian's Girls Academy High School Division's idol, Rosa Gigantea.

"Um, Noriko-san."

"Yes?"

Noriko raised her head after she finished cutting the navy-blue cloth. When she turned around, she saw that a student who usually sat a fair distance away was standing right behind her.

It wasn't particularly unusual to see students out of their seats in the chaos of the home economics sewing room. The big group tables were cluttered with four people's cloth.

"What is it?"

Noriko asked, and the girl either didn't have anything to talk about or found it hard to say, because she started with the obvious piece of flattery, "That's lovely cloth you have," before lapsing into an awkward silence.

"Kyouko-san, did you really come all the way over here just to compliment Noriko-san's cloth?"

Touko-san spoke those prickly words, working beside Noriko. She'd been in a bad mood for a little while now, for some unknown reason. Like an enemy of friendliness, her eyes were focused on the cloth she was cutting apart, making her a terrifying presence for those at the same table.

Kyouko-san, however, was unaware of this, so she shrugged off Touko-san's hostility and took a half-step forward, as though she'd firmed her resolve.

"No, there was something I wanted to ask ... Um, Noriko-san, have you become close to Rosa Gigantea?"

"Huh?"

That topic was so far removed from the earlier, "Lovely cloth," comment that Noriko couldn't respond immediately.

"Well, you were talking to her earlier, right? Toudou Shimako-sama, the second-year."

"Um, Shimako-san's ... "

No sooner had Noriko uttered this than the air around her classmates began to tremble.

"Did you say Shimako-san ... !?"

Everyone had been listening in to their conversation.

"Oh my, using the honorific "-san" with an older student."

"Do you have that close a relationship with her?"

"Did you know her before you started school?"

"Have you been to her house?"

"Don't tell me you're related, or something like that."

Since the teacher was in the preparation room just now, everyone took the chance to get out of their seats and crowd around Noriko.

"Ah, um. Hold on a minute."

Sadly, Noriko was submerged in the flood of people, floundering and close to drowning.

"Actually, it's like this."

Kyouko-san, the first to talk to Noriko, started speaking as a representative.

"The Red, White and Yellow Roses are so popular they're adored not just by the high-school students but also by middle-school students. So when one of them takes a special interest in someone, it's only natural that everyone would take note ... You understand, right Noriko-san?"

"I guess."

She responded equivocally to the question of whether she understood. But Noriko thought they'd just been talking normally in the hallway, it wasn't like they were co-workers having an affair. It was odd that her classmates would get so worked up about that.

"Toudou Shimako-sama has a graceful beauty about her, right? She's always calm, and ascended to the role of Rosa Gigantea young, as a second-year. But despite that, everyone's concerned because she still hasn't chosen a soeur."

The moment she said the word "soeur," it got noisy again.

"Don't tell me they've already made the soeur vow ... "

Came from someone in the back, sounding like a scream.

"The soeur vow?"

"You've already accepted her rosary!?"

Most of the students crowding around her had come up through Lillian's middle-school, so they continued their conversation leaving Noriko behind in confusion.

"Rosary? Accepted? Becoming soeurs ... "

Having no idea what was going on, Noriko asked the obvious questions and was greeted with the sounds of suppressed laughter, probably from relief, leaking out all around her.

"If you don't know what a rosary is – "

"I do, just not why you're all so worked up about them."

(Such an unpleasant smile.)

Even Noriko knew what a rosary was.

(Rosaries are those things ... Christians use them, juzu with a cross attached.)

But it was a complete mystery what that would have to do with Shimako-san.

Basically, one of the classmates surrounding Noriko explained it like this:

"For a long time, there's been a tight bond between grades at Lillian's Girls Academy. Almost like real sisters, the older students provide guidance to all the younger girls, and the younger girls abide by the direction of all their elders."

But there were cases where individuals could join together. Apparently that was done through the previously mentioned "soeur vow," where the older student would give a rosary to the younger one.

"One onee-sama can only have one petit soeur. It's a one-on-one relationship, so the exchange of vows is an acknowledgment of the closest possible relationship. It's a bit like going steady with someone and rejecting other offers."

"We call those sisters "soeurs.""

Even with soeurs, they'd be called older sister or younger sister, or grand soeur and petit soeur if clarity were needed.

"That such a system exists ... "

Noriko muttered, looking down.

"My my. But Noriko, you shouldn't be disappointed even if you haven't received a rosary yet."

"Indeed. We'll offer you what little support we can."

Apparently her classmates were under the misapprehension that Noriko desired Shimako-san's rosary. They'd apparently interpreted her silence from culture shock as something else entirely.

(My head hurts ... What is up with this school –)

Terrifying, Lillian's Girls Academy. She had dismissed it as just another rich girls' school, but that may have been concealing something far more incomprehensible.

"Don't cry, Noriko-san. We're cheering for you."

(... "Don't cry," seriously, who would?)

"Noriko-san's smart and a little aloof. I'm sure no-one would complain if Shimako-sama chose her as her petit soeur."

The conversation continued around her. No-one seemed to notice that the person in question had been left behind. It was almost as though Noriko was the only one that didn't understand a thing.

Until recently they'd been looking at her with interest, envy and even a little bit of jealousy, but why had those gazes changed to ones of compassion and sympathy? Surely these girls must be good little lambs beloved by Maria-sama, after all.

It was at this point that, accompanied by a clattering sound, the girl sitting beside Noriko stood up.

"Can't you be a bit more quiet?"

She'd been silent the entire time, so Noriko had completely forgotten that Touko-san was there.

"Why are you all saying such impudent things? Noriko-san being chosen as Rosa Gigantea's petit soeur ... there's no way that would ever happen!"

Touko-san stormed off, her eyes shimmering.

"Touko-san."



Noriko was about to chase after her, but a muttered, "You should be more discreet," stopped her.

"You know, she's always dreamed about becoming the petit soeur of a Rose."

"Yeah, it must have come as a shock to her to hear that Noriko-san had become close to Shimako-sama."

At Touko-san's vacated seat, there was some left over cloth with a large and showy rose pattern on it, an odd choice for a skirt.

* * *

The omens for a brouhaha were already creeping up on Noriko unnoticed.

It began with her shoes.

She was on duty that day, so was leaving late after writing in the day log when she noticed that her shoe box was empty.

"I'm wearing my indoor shoes right now. Which would mean my leather shoes are unaccounted for ... "

If someone had mistaken her locker for theirs, then that careless person's indoor shoes should be in her shoe box, but they weren't. First of all, the small lockers had nameplates on them, so that sort of mistake shouldn't happen to begin with.

"Well, what should I do then?"

Thinking she'd have to go home in her indoor shoes, Noriko stepped out the entrance and saw a pair of black ballet flats lined up neatly on the mat.

"??? ... How on earth did that happen?"

Noriko pondered for a while, looking down at the words "Nijou Noriko" written on the insole.

Part 4.

" – Then, this morning, there were paperclips in my indoor shoes."

"Paperclips?"

Hearing Noriko's grumbling, Shimako-san tilted her head slightly in confusion. As busy as Rosa Gigantea was, she had still appeared, lunch box in hand, at the back of the auditorium at lunch time, just as she'd promised.

"Yeah, paperclips. Normally if they were going to do that, it'd be thumbtacks, right?"

"They'd put thumbtacks in your indoor shoes?"

Shimako-san frowned, "That sounds painful." Then, as she picked up a slice of rolled omelet, she said softly, "Why would they do something like that, I wonder."

" – Shimako-san, you don't read girls manga, do you? Putting thumbtacks in indoor shoes or ballet shoes is a standard form of harassment."

"Really?"

" ... Although that sort of manga has been on the decline recently."

Even so, there were a lot of reprints lately.

In Noriko's case, rather than spending her allowance on manga books, she slowly saved it up to go towards her photo-albums of Buddhist statues, so she hadn't spent her own money to learn this. She'd gained this knowledge by reading absolutely all of her older cousin's old comic books when she was visiting them. So it was some distance removed from recent manga.

"But that's getting off topic."

An explanation would take up the rest of their lunch break, so Noriko set the discussion about girls manga to one side for now.

The bookshelves in Shimako-san's room probably wouldn't contain girls manga, and definitely wouldn't contain photo-albums of Buddhist statues.

"But it was a paperclip, right?"

"That's right."

They had paperclips in them, but if she'd found them in the bin then that would have been a far more effective form of harassment. No matter how Noriko looked at it, the treatment she was getting was way too half-hearted. She couldn't even begin to fathom the state of mind of whoever perpetrated these acts.

"Do you think they could have got into your indoor shoes accidentally?"

"A 5cm paper clip accidentally getting in there? One in each shoe?"

"I suppose you're right. But why would anyone be teasing you, Noriko?"

"..."

Noriko silently took a bite of her sandwich.

There was no way that the girl in front of her would be thinking about how popular she was, and that others might be jealous of Noriko being around her.

"Ah, on top of that, Touko-san hadn't been speaking to me ever since the conversation about the rosary."

She couldn't hold it in any longer. Even though Noriko would have preferred it if school was just a place for her to learn. Why did she have to think about all this other stuff?

"... Rosary? Ah, that reminds me."

Shimako-san closed the lid of her empty lunch box, then pulled something out of her pocket saying, "Before I forget."

"Here you go."

She was holding out a small cloth bag.

"?"

"Don't you remember? I asked you to come here so I could give you this, right?"

"Ah."

The juzu. Because it was in an usual casing, she hadn't recognized it immediately.

"Don't open it here."

Shimako-san's hand stopped the movement of Noriko's fingers.

"It would be an affront to Maria-sama. When you get home, you can take your time looking at it. If you like it, you can keep it for a while."

"... Are you sure that's okay?"

"I don't have your eyes for these things, Noriko. More importantly, you were saying something about a rosary just before. What was that all about?"

(... wait, she was actually listening?)

"About that."

Noriko summarized the events of yesterday, and Shimako-san responded with the slightly off-base question, "Do you want my rosary?"

"I don't mind."

"I wouldn't hesitate to give it to you. But is it something that you really need right now?"

"... Yeah, I understand."

Noriko nodded, stood up and folded up the handkerchief she'd been sitting on.

Even without the rosary, she'd still be able to meet Shimako-san like this. They'd still be able to talk.

(But.)

The truth was, somewhere deep in her heart, she felt a sense of disappointment.

(What would Shimako-san have to say to me, for me to be satisfied – ?)

Did she want some proof that she alone was special?

(So then maybe what I do want most of all is for Shimako-san to give me her rosary.)

Just then, Noriko had a realization.

That what she wanted was simply to understand Shimako-san's heart.

* * *

When she returned to the classroom, a picture of Doraemon had been drawn in chalk on her desk.

The girl who sat beside her still hadn't returned yet, and looking around the classroom everyone was either chatting or busy getting ready for the next class. No-one seemed to be paying any attention to the graffiti on her desk.

Giving up on tracking down the perpetrator, Noriko once more looked at her desk.

"It's so well done it's a shame to rub it out... "

At present, no real harm had been done. There was an innocence to the pranks. That was why.

(Maybe it's not going to escalate.)

That was the sort of feeling she had, for no particular reason. That it was just a bit of messing around.

But those were naïve thoughts.

Even if they were unavoidable.

At that time, neither Noriko nor Shimako-san knew that someone had witnessed the hand-over of the pouch at the rear of the auditorium.

The Maria Ceremony Inquisition

Part 1.

The angels sang as they walked.

They went in order of height, the archangels with wings, the flower-bearers with baskets of flowers hanging around their neck, the little angels, all of them costumed kindergarteners.

The angels had paraded the considerable distance from the kindergarten to the middle- and high-school buildings. – To pay a visit to all the Maria-samas within the campus.

They'd been blessed with good weather for this year's Maria Ceremony, and the clear blue sky spread out forever without a single cloud in it, like their heavenly mother's soul.

All the statues of Maria-sama had been adorned with flowers for today. The one that lived in the small grove near where the ginkgo-tree path split was no exception.

The usually white Maria-sama statue was, for today only, covered in a flowers of many different colors. Noriko hadn't been expecting this, so was startled when she saw it on her way to school.

As she was heading to her classroom, Noriko looked out the hallway window and saw Shimako-san walking outside. She was carrying a medium sized cardboard box, walking quickly in the direction of the chapel.

"Shima ... "

Noriko started to call out to her, but stopped. Her mind was likely occupied with thoughts about the Yamayurikai organized first-year welcoming event.

(I wonder if we'll have a chance to see each other after it's over.)

Noriko still had the juzu that she'd borrowed in her school bag. She'd been bringing it to school every day in case there was a chance to return it, but the opportunity had never arisen.

Borrowing Sumireko-san's magnifying glass and looking at the juzu while thinking of Shimako-san had become Noriko's daily routine.

Her soul felt cleansed just looking at those crystal beads. There was a tiny Buddha inlaid in the conspicuously larger bead just above the purple tassel. The Buddha was carved out of ivory or something similar, and though it was about the size of an adzuki bean, the detail was so fine that each of his fingers were clearly visible. The profoundly benevolent expression stirred the human heart. Wicked thoughts were forbidden when looking at Buddhist images, but it was such a splendid juzu that Noriko would unintentionally think, "This must be worth a fortune," when she held it.

"Noriko-san, have you heard from Rosa Gigantea what today's entertainment is?"

When Noriko arrived at her desk, a couple of her classmates came over and asked her this. Since they didn't have classes today, there weren't that many people in the first-year camellia classroom just yet.

"Entertainment?"

"For the welcoming ceremony the Yamayurikai are hosting after the mass, of course."

They all laughed innocently.

"It's a tradition that the executive members put on some kind of performance. Last year, when she was a bouton, Rosa Chinensis played Ave Maria on the piano. Shimako-sama can play the piano too, right? I'm sure it'll be good."

(Huh ... even the Roses are going to a lot of trouble.)

Noriko liked watching amateur talent shows, but then Shimako-san was added into that mix, so of course her interest was piqued.

(I see. So Shimako-san's good at the piano ...)

Her classmate's offhanded comment had been surprisingly informative. She also filed away the fact that the Roses' petit soeurs were called boutons.

At that moment, one of the students near the door came over to Noriko and said:

"The Roses are here to see you."

"Ah, okay."

Noriko walked out into the hallway thinking it would be Shimako-san, but there were two unexpected people waiting there.

(– Red Rose and Yellow Rose.)

Roses were Roses, but the color was different. It was the two third-years that Noriko had seen some time ago walking in the courtyard with Shimako-san. From memory, their titles were Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida.

"Gokigenyou. Are you Nijou Noriko-san?"

The tall girl with short hair, Rosa Foetida, asked her amicably.

"Yes ... ?"

Noriko stood up straight and answered, not knowing why she'd been called out here. Sadly, while she had no interest in the Red or Yellow Roses, they were two grades above her. It would be a lie to say she was unafraid of them.

"Hmm."

In contrast to her partner, Rosa Chinensis looked Noriko up and down, appraising her.

"So this is Shimako's ... "

Her casually arranged, long, glossy hair swayed gently.

"She's still a bit raw ... although."

"Ah!"

Rosa Foetida suddenly grabbed Noriko's jaw, pointing her face in various directions.

"What are you doing!"

Noriko brushed off Rosa Foetida's hand.

"Oh, she's got some fight in her. Wonderfully fierce."

(What's up with these two... ! Treating me like some sort of animal!)

"She'll do, you think?"

"I suppose."

The pair looked at each other and conferred quietly. Then, after arriving at some conclusion, they said, "That's all thanks," turned and left.

"Wait a minute."

Enraged, Noriko called to the two seniors.

"Mm?"

"You called me out here, you've come to some sort of agreement, and now you're leaving without an explanation?"

Rosa Foetida turned around and looked into the eyes of Noriko who was shaking with anger. Then she said, "She's got a point," and walked the couple of steps back to her.

"So you want to know why we came to see you? It's because we wanted to see your face – is that good enough?"

"You came to see my face?"

"Yep. We simply wanted to see your face."

"Why ... ?"

"Because we wanted to see it, of course. It's not hard to answer why we wanted to see it. We wanted to see what we wanted to see, right? ... Do you have any other questions?"

"No ... I don't."

If they were going to answer like that, she had no idea what to ask. For some reason, she got the feeling they were trying to confuse her.

"Then in that case, I have one. Nijou Noriko-san, do you like Shimako?"

"I do, why?"

"Then it's fine. Good luck to you."

Rosa Foetida left her with that and returned to the waiting Rosa Chinensis and this time they left.

"Good luck she said ... ? With what ... ?"

Pondering those ambiguous words of encouragement, Noriko was returning to the classroom when she bumped into Touko-san, who was just leaving.

"First it was Rosa Gigantea, now you're sucking up to Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida as well, huh."

Touko-san said, with a look of hatred that seemed so out of place on her face.

"That's not it."

Noriko said as Touko-san walked away, but Touko-san didn't turn around.

"... Huh."

Noriko sighed in resignation. Her spirit felt exhausted. What would she have to do to get a peaceful school life?

Returning to her seat, Noriko saw that her school bag was sitting open on her desk.

(...?)

That sight made her feel incredibly uncomfortable. Noriko thought her bag had been hanging from the hook on the side of her desk when she'd left.

With a bad feeling, she hastily inspected its contents.

(Commuter pass, purse, pencil case ...)

As she checked, the blood slowly drained from her face.

(... What do I do!)

The only thing missing was Shimako-san's juzu.

Part 2.

The morning was taken up with a mass for all high-school students, led by a priest from outside the school.

However, neither his sermon about gratitude nor the lovely voices of the choir entered into Noriko's consciousness. She couldn't stop thinking about the missing juzu.

(Just who would ...)

She didn't want to think about that. However, when she left home, it was definitely in her school bag. Then she'd found the bag left there lying open – .

The only thing she could think was that someone had taken it.

(Just another prank? No, this is different.)

If it were just another prank, then the juzu would have been returned to her by now.

(But who? And why? Did they know it was a juzu?)

She couldn't look her fellow classmates straight in the eye. But it seemed unlikely that someone from another class would tamper with her bag, since they'd stick out like a sore thumb. Even if her classmates didn't know it was Noriko's bag, it obviously belonged to someone in first-year camellia class.

The culprit was among them.

A chill ran along Noriko's spine as she guessed at their motive.

When the mass finished, Noriko went looking for Shimako-san.

(What should I do? I have to tell Shimako-san about the juzu ...)

She spent her lunch time scouring the school grounds, but in the end couldn't find the busy Rosa Gigantea.

Then, with Noriko completely exhausted and her shoulders slumping, the afternoon's event, the Yamayurikai organized new students' welcoming ceremony, began.

Part 3.

The ceremony began without any teachers or nuns present.

Lillian's Girls Academy respected the independence of its high-school students, so it was customary that the adults wouldn't intervene in the school council's events.

There were about two hundred first-years assembled in the chapel, seated by class in six blocks.

Six older students with corsages pinned to their chests, apparently members of the school council, were standing in the area where the priest had been not that long ago. It went without saying that the three in the middle had red, yellow and white roses befitting their titles. The three hanging back had pink rose corsages.

"To all first-year students, let me begin by congratulating you on entering high-school."

The student holding the mic and stepping forward looked incredibly striking. There was no need to check the color of the rose pinned to her chest, it was the senior that had brazenly appraised Noriko – Rosa Chinensis.

"Lillian's Girls Academy's high-school student council is called the Yamayurikai, after the mountain lily associated with Maria-sama's soul. Because of this, every year we hold a welcoming event for the first-years on the day of the Maria Ceremony."

Rose, lily, whatever. Fine, have a speech, but can't she wrap it up quickly?

However, it seemed Noriko was the only thinking that. The classmates around her were listening to Rosa Chinensis' words with rapt attention. For some reason, they seemed ten times more serious than when they'd been listening to the priest's sermon.

(... Shimako-san.)

Standing diagonally behind Rosa Chinensis, Shimako-san wasn't looking around restlessly like Noriko was. Since she didn't know what had happened, she stood there calm and composed.

(Shimako-sa~n. Something terrible has happened. What should I do?)

Even when Shimako-san did finally look her way, the distance was too far for her to do anything.

"As older students we happily welcome our new younger sisters. Together, let us enjoy our time at school in a manner that Maria-sama will approve of. We've been planning and practicing for what's happening next, so we hope you enjoy it."

Even if they hoped she'd enjoy it, Noriko wasn't really interested in hearing the council members sing or put on a talent show. But if it was Shimako-san playing the piano, then she might listen.

(– but it doesn't look like they're doing that.)

"We'll start with the presentation of commemorative medallions."

The mic had been handed over to the tall, short-haired girl – Rosa Foetida.

"When your class is called, line up in single file."

First-year plum class was lined up in front of Rosa Chinensis, wisteria class in front of Rosa Foetida and chrysanthemum class in front of Rosa Gigantea.

Incidentally, Noriko was in camellia class and it looked as though they'd be called last, to line up in front of Rosa Gigantea when chrysanthemum class was done.

From a distance, the medallion looked something like a pendant. It hung from a chain around the neck, like a medal.

"May the Virgin Mary bless you and watch over you."

Three people for six classes. But it didn't take as long as expected, because all they were doing was handing out the medals. Each Rose would take a medallion from the basket held by their pink-rose wearing assistant and skillfully place it around the neck of a first-year.

"Would peach class, pine class and camellia class step forward now."

While the announcement was still being made, Noriko sluggishly got to her feet. She wasn't interested in receiving a medallion, but there would be an outcry if she refused. She was worried about the juzu, so wanted this ceremony to be over as soon as possible.

"May the Virgin Mary bless you and watch over you."

Shimako-san said to each girl in turn as she placed a medallion around their neck. There were two more people in line ahead of Noriko.

(Perhaps someone's returning the juzu to my bag right at this moment.)

Noriko idly thought as she waited in line. However, all her classmates were currently in the chapel with her.

(One more.)

"May the Virgin Mary bless you and watch over you."

(Next.)

When the student in front of Noriko received her medallion and walked away, Rosa Gigantea appeared and smiled when she saw it was Noriko.

"May th- "

Shimako-san started to speak but was interrupted.

"Stop right there!"

The voice came from behind Noriko.

"That girl doesn't qualify to receive a medallion from Rosa Gigantea."

The owner of the voice stepped forward, pushing her way through the murmuring students.

"Touko-san!"

Noriko shouted when she saw her face.

"Esteemed Roses, please forgive me for interrupting this sacred ceremony."

Touko-san glanced at Noriko, then turned to the three Roses and bowed quickly. Her trademark ringlets bounced like springs.

"What is the meaning of this. Umm ... Touko-san?"

"Please listen, Rosa Chinensis. Touko can't stay silent any longer."

There it was.

The certain kill, her watery eyes technique.

(Just what the heck is she going to say?)

A single bead of sweat broke out on Noriko's forehead.

"Just now, you said something about Noriko-san not meeting the qualifications to receive a medallion from Rosa Gigantea?"

"That's right, Rosa Foetida."

In her usual manner, Touko-san had succeeded in capturing the attention of the Red and Yellow Roses.

At that moment, the color of Rosa Gigantea's face changed.

(Shimako-san ... ?)

Shimako-san's eyes were focused on a single point. Noriko followed her gaze and arrived at Touko-san's left hand.

(What's going on?)

Looking closer, Noriko let out an, "Erk." What Touko-san was tightly grasping would indeed have the power to change Shimako-san's complexion.

(I-I've got to get that back somehow.)

Noriko reached out for it, but Touko-san had obviously been expecting this and lifted her arm high in the air.

"This is more fitting for you."

With Touko-san's loud laughter as background music, the dazzling light coming through the stained glass windows caught the crystal juzu, making it shine brilliantly like a halo.

– Amen.

Part 4.

In truth, it wasn't the right time for it, but.

The way the juzu sparkled in the chapel was really pretty and Noriko was mesmerized by it for a little while.

It may have been impudent, but didn't it fit in nicely?

"This is yours, right Noriko-san?"

Touko-san announced triumphantly, holding forth the juzu.

Noriko used her gaze to control Shimako-san, who looked like she was about to jump out, adopted an imposing stance and responded, "It's not mine."

It had been left in her care by Shimako-san so it wasn't a lie. Of course she had no intention of mentioning who the real owner was.

"Just how did you come to the conclusion that it was mine, Touko-san?"

Noriko was peeved, having just been attacked. If Touko-san was looking for a fight, she'd get one.

"That was ... "

The ringlets faltered for a moment. If she said she saw it in Noriko's school bag, then she'd have to admit to opening the bag without permission.

"Come on, why did you think that?"

(If you can answer, then answer!)

In front of Maria-sama.

"I accidentally bumped into Noriko-san's desk and it came flying out."

Touko-san's response was smooth, like she'd practiced it.

"Don't you lie to me!"

(How dare she lie so shamelessly in the chapel.)

Even if she was unwilling to back down from that, would someone normally open the pouch and look inside? On top of that, she'd silently taken someone else's personal belongings.

(Even kindergarteners should know not to steal someone else's things.)

"What do you say, Noriko-san. Is this your property, like Touko-san claims?"

This time it was Rosa Chinensis that questioned her.

"I told you it wasn't."

"You'd swear that in front of Maria-sama?"

"Of course."

Noriko answered, puffed up with pride. But when Touko-san heard this, she chortled.

"Well then, I can throw it away, right?"

"Huh!?"

The juzu left her hand and carved an arc through the sky.

"If it doesn't belong to you, then it's none of your concern, right?"

Rosa Foetida caught it, and started juggling the juzu. So asking to have it returned would be the same as admitting it was hers then.

She hadn't expected the Spanish Inquisition.

"So you're asking me to destroy the juzu to prove my faith? ... Alright, I confess. It's mine."

"Noriko!"

Shimako-san rushed forwards, unable to contain herself.

The students who'd been quietened by the developments started to get noisy again with Rosa Gigantea's unexpected entry.

"Shimako-san, don't say anything unnecessary."

"But."

"It's okay. At the moment, I'm the one with the problem."

Noriko turned her back to Shimako-san and took a step forward, to protect her.

"Nice attitude."

Rosa Chinensis smiled elegantly. It was the first time Noriko realized that she may be an incredible beauty.

"It was never my intention to blaspheme before Maria-sama, but that doesn't mean I didn't bring the juzu to school. While it may have been my fault for bringing something unrelated to my studies to school, how is it

different to a comic book or a CD? There's no prohibition against bringing Buddhist items to school."

Noriko talked on and on. She may have been making excuses or quibbling, but she was explaining as best she could.

"Oh, things just got real."

Rosa Foetida muttered in amazement.

"Give me back the juzu."

Noriko commanded, holding out her hand. However, Rosa Foetida did not return it.

"Not yet."

"If you want it back, tell us who it belongs to. Earlier, you said it wasn't yours, didn't you Noriko-san?"

Rosa Chinensis provided the cross-examination, bringing her gorgeous smile to bear on Noriko.

"Even now, you admit that you brought it to school, but you did not claim that it was yours. Which means that the owner must be someone else, no?"

"..."

She had to hand it to the school council. They hadn't overlooked a thing.

"Noriko ... "

Noriko held back Shimako-san, who was about to step forwards. Then gently kept holding her hand, to reassure her.

But for all her outward show of strength, the problem had not been resolved. Noriko still stood on trial.

"Answer the question, Noriko-san."

"It's – "

She was lost for words.

Certainly, she'd done nothing wrong. But there were things she couldn't honestly say too.

(Because it would cause a problem for someone else ... ?)

That's it.

If Noriko told the truth, this idiotic inquisition would turn its attention to Shimako-san.

That she would not allow.

(Because, ignoring myself for the moment, Shimako-san actually does truly believe in the teachings of Christ. Yet she's still prepared to leave the school if everyone finds out about her secret ...)

"What's the matter, Noriko-san?"

Rosa Chinensis looked into Noriko's eyes, searching for an answer.

(What should I do ...)

If she did say that the juzu was hers now, it may end the investigation. But if she did, she'd be lying in front of Maria-sama.

For Shimako-san's sake, Noriko was prepared to tell as many lies as she had to.

But would Shimako-san allow Noriko to lie on her behalf?

Noriko was backed into a corner.

(But, other than a lie –)

"Say something, Noriko-san."

"What happened to your earlier spirit?"

She knew that as long as she remained silent her opponents attacks would grow more impudent.

Shimako-san squeezed Noriko's hand tightly. She realized later that this was a sign that, "You've done well."

"That's quite enough!"

Shimako-san shouted. Noriko noticed she'd taken a half-step forward.

She took a deep breath, then said quite clearly:

"I'm the owner of that juzu."

"Shimako-san!"

As well as Noriko's shriek, there were also cries of "Shimako-sama" and "Rosa Gigantea." The chapel was in uproar, with face after face after face focused on Shimako-san.

Shimako-san looked over her shoulder, surveying the entirety of the chapel and the commotion instantly ceased.

"Would you care to explain?"

Rosa Chinensis looked directly at Shimako-san. Shimako-san initially nodded, then said, "Before that."

"Before that, I'd like you to excuse Noriko's behavior. Noriko was just protecting me."

"... How so?"

"Because I gave Noriko my juzu to look after. If there's a penalty, then I should take its full weight."

Shimako-san said resolutely.

"No, I should be the one ... !"

Noriko jumped forward, but someone gently restrained her shoulder.

"Noriko-san, please don't interfere."

Surprisingly, it was Rosa Foetida.

"Wha ... ?"

She whispered that it was okay, then turned her attention back to Shimako-san.

"Why would a devout Christian like you – "

Rosa Chinensis asked quietly.

Everyone waited with bated breath. For the words that would come from Shimako-san's mouth next.

"Because my family runs a Buddhist temple."

Words could not express how beautiful Shimako-san looked as she made this declaration, facing the cross.

Nobody said a word.

The strength drained from Noriko's body, and she fell on her ass.

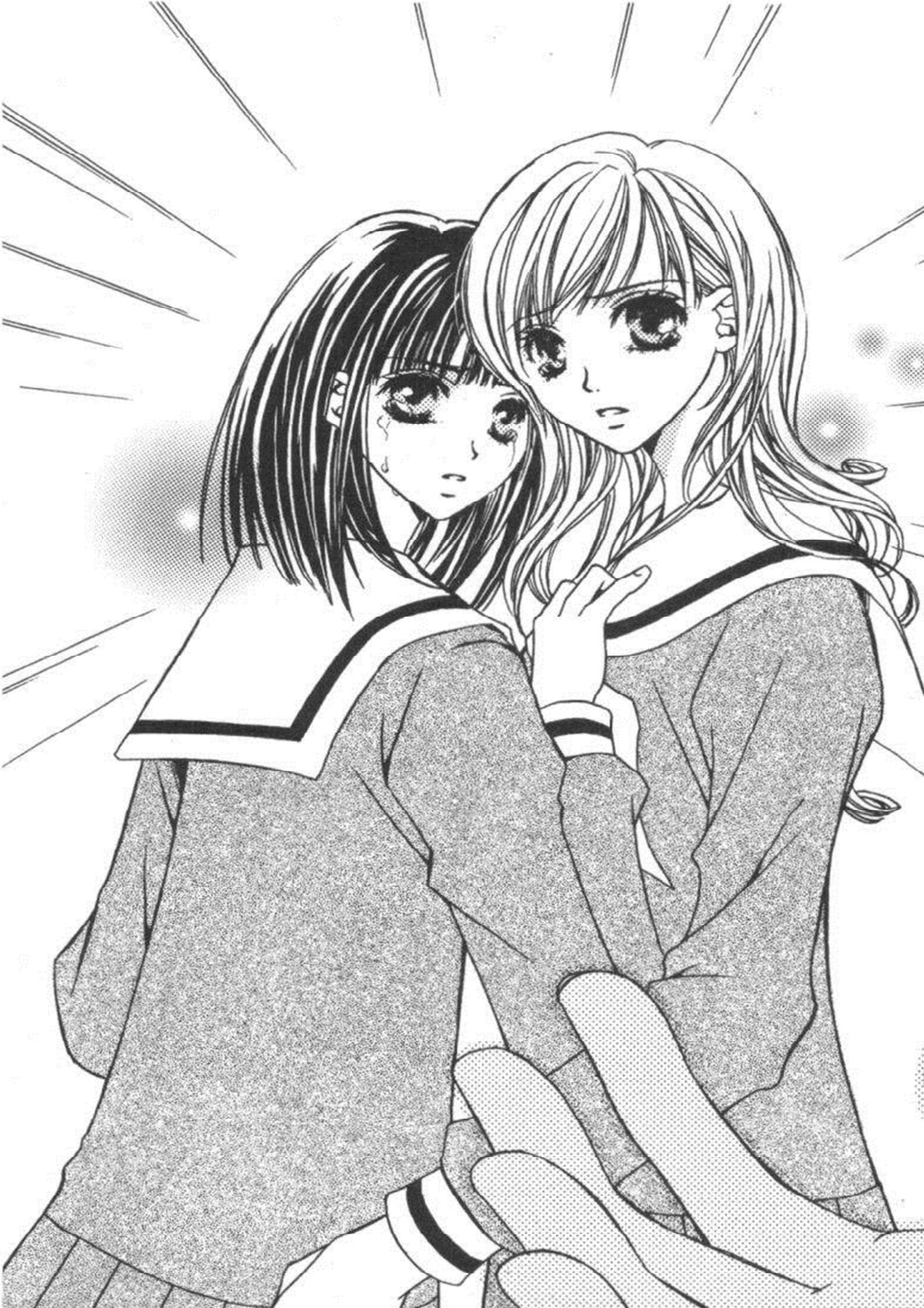
(... She finally said it.)

Still sitting on the floor exhausted, Noriko looked up and saw that the blurry outline coming towards her was the real Shimako-san.

"You worked so hard to protect me, I'm sorry."

"Shimako-san!"

Noriko clung to her and cried like a child. She didn't understand why the tears wouldn't stop. Even though she didn't know what the tears were for, she let them give voice to her emotions.



(That's it, it's all over.)

She remembered what Touko-san had said some time ago. About enduring, but crying when you wanted to – it was exactly like that.

Clap, clap, clap, clap.

Somewhere, someone was applauding.

"You finally said it, Shimako."

It was Rosa Chinensis.

"Oh brother. This year's entertainment was fairly over the top, wasn't it."

Rosa Foetida shrugged.

"Huh?"

Noriko and Shimako-san, still embracing, exclaimed in unison. The atmosphere in the room had changed somehow.

"A big round of applause to Shimako and Noriko-san for showing us a vision of beautiful sisterly love!"

Rosa Chinensis said into the mic (had she been holding that all along?), bringing the event to a climax.

"Huh? ... Wha!?"

Unbelievably, the sound of applause surrounded them in the auditorium, like a sudden downpour of rain. What kind of magic was this, they all looked incredibly moved, as though they'd just watched a dramatic masterpiece. There were even some students who were crying as they applauded – just what was the meaning of this? To begin with, who among those students would be crying after finding out the truth?

Rosa Chinensis spoke to the bewildered pair.

"Why have you been hiding it until now? Did you really think that the daughter from a Buddhist temple couldn't attend a Catholic school?"

"Huh?"

"Honestly. I don't know if it's earnestness or stubbornness. But it was worth the buildup."

Rosa Foetida agreed, looking elated.

(Buildup?)

"Then, about my family – "

Rosa Foetida laughed when Shimako-san timidly started to ask.

"Of course we knew. My grandfather's a parishioner at Shouguuu temple.

Didn't you know that?"

"Wha!?"

"I'll tell you something else too. All of the parishioners know that you attend Lillian's too. They've got a bet going with the chief priest about when you'll come out and announce it."

"... No way."

Rosa Chinensis said it so easily. Even though Shimako-san had spent so much time agonizing over it.

"I didn't really think it was something that you had to admit. But, Shimako, keeping it hidden seemed to be causing you pain. I thought the best way would be for you to announce it in front of everyone. But that meant we had to deceive you. I apologize for that."

This was the "brouhaha" that Sumireko-san had talked about. Noriko sniffed, still not fully satisfied with the explanation.

(A public shaming in front of everyone, my tears –)

"Although I deserve a lot of the credit for spotting Noriko-san, right?"

"Touko-san!"

She chuckled and tilted her head when Noriko rushed over to her.

"You know, the Red Rose and Yellow Rose onee-samas begged Touko to help out. But playing a villain was such fun!"

Noriko remembered, all too late, that Touko-san had said she was joining the drama club.

"Then my outdoor shoes, and the clips in my indoor shoes, and the graffiti on my desk – "

"Of course? I wanted to give you a sense of impending danger, but a thumbtack would really hurt. When I saw her give you that cloth pouch

behind the auditorium, I thought, "This is suspicious, there's definitely something here." Isn't Touko brilliant!"

Touko-san closed her eyes, slowly getting drunk on herself.

"Right. Let Touko give you one piece of advice Noriko-san – when you have something precious in your school bag, keep it locked. You're surprisingly absentminded, so anyone could look in your bag whenever they felt like it."

Such a sweet personality. Noriko felt dizzy thinking she'd have to spend the rest of the year in the same class as her.

"Rose onee-samas, Touko was of use to you, wasn't she? Your praise please!"

"Touko! Before that, you apologize!!"

Noriko's furious roar echoed around the tall ceiling of the chapel.

Part 5.

After the medallions were handed out to the remaining students, the Yamayurikai's first-year welcoming ceremony came to a close.

"Shimako did ask to be punished."

Rosa Chinensis said as they watched the first-years leave.

"I heard Noriko-san say she wanted to be punished too."

Rosa Foetida said, smiling.

"So we'll leave the cleanup to you." – With those parting words, the Yamayurikai executive and their assistants went on ahead.

"But it was kinda fun, hey."

Rosa Foetida whispered, so that Noriko and Shimako-san couldn't hear.

Rosa Chinensis smiled slightly and said, "Yeah."

Shimako and Noriko-san were left behind.

Somehow it didn't make sense that they'd been publicly humiliated and then punished.

First of all, what was the punishment for?

(Did we actually do anything wrong? – Maria-sama, please tell me.)

But, naturally, the statue of Maria-sama in the chapel didn't offer any form of response.

"Noriko, can you bring me the dustpan?"

"Ah, okay."

Shimako-san, however, seemed invigorated and happy as she cleaned the chapel. Like the blue sky after a downpour, or a gentle breeze in early summer, or after finally letting out a sneeze that had been building up.

(So, well, it's fine.)

Noriko chose to think of it like that.

Maria-sama was watching over them.

The afternoon light coming through the stained glass windows made the room absolutely beautiful.

(I should send an email to Takuya-kun when I get home.)

To say that Buddhist statues were great. But statues of Maria-sama also had a distinct beauty to them.

(Going to churches to look at statues of Maria-sama could be fun too.)

As Noriko started to think this, the Maria-sama in a school uniform beside her turned towards her and smiled.

"Next time, why don't we go and look at Buddhist statues together?"

She said.

BGN (Background Noise)

When the Cherry Blossoms Fall

Part 1.

Shimako-san was behaving strangely.

Yumi noticed it not long after the new first-years had entered into high-school. Three or four days after, perhaps.

"Ooh."

She had no idea why. Shimako-san liked looking at and eating cherry blossoms, so it seemed unlikely that she'd be allergic to them. There was already one person like that, Yumi's onnee-sama Ogasawara Sachiko-sama, and that was more than enough. Besides, her symptoms were a little different.

"Why are you yelping like a little dog?"

Appearing in front of Yumi's desk with her trademark twin ponytails was Shimazu Yoshino. Probably returning from the toilet, the floral handkerchief she was holding was wet in places.

But Yumi was a wordless little dog. She was silent, like a shih tzu or maltese dog.

"Huh?"

Yumi felt a momentary sense of cognitive dissonance, wondering why Yoshino-san was there. Noticing this, her sharp-eyed friend got a strange look on her face and grumbled.

"... Yumi-san, can you please stop looking so surprised every time you see me in the classroom."

"Oh, you noticed?"

Yumi tried forcing a smile to hide her embarrassment. But Yoshino-san wasn't even slightly fooled.

"You're too easy to read. Also, I've noticed you looking around for Shimako-san."

"You've got me."

"Get it together, Rosa Chinensis en bouton."

"Hahaha. I'm not used to that name either."

The name Rosa Chinensis en bouton was the only thing magnificent about her, because she just couldn't get it together. And because she herself was aware of this, all she could do was laugh feebly.

Take yesterday as an example, when she'd been guilty of the monumental blunder of heading to the first-year peach group classroom when she arrived at school in the morning.

"Hard to believe, hey."

Yoshino-san muttered, her eyes narrowing. She was Rosa Foetida en bouton. That alone gave her a certain presence, if seen from the right angle.

So that was it.

When April arrived, the first-years naturally became second-years. This hadn't felt even slightly real to Yumi, and she alone had been warped backwards in time.

This was the second-year pine class. The room that Sachiko-sama had been studying in until recently.

It was the first time in the thirteen years since kindergarten that Yoshino-san had been in the same class as her.

Shimako-san, who'd been in Yumi's class in first-year, was in second-year wisteria class. Sadly, they were in different classes this time.

Well, okay. It left the door open to meeting new people.

"Oh ho. Rosa Chinensis en bouton is a springtime fool."

Someone jumped into their conversation, after listening in for who knows how long.

(– Why's she ... ?)

"Gah, Mami-san."

Despite being taken aback, the lights soon went on for Yumi and she grabbed hold of the girl's arm.

"Don't put that in an article!"

Shimako-san could get lost in thought and still maintain her dignity, but it would expose Yumi as a natural ditz. Which would not be acceptable for the person known as Rosa Chinensis en bouton. While Yumi knew she hadn't smoothly inherited Sachiko-sama's image, it would be too depressing to Sachiko-sama to have her petit soeur destroy all her past accomplishments.

"I wonder what I should do."

"Please don't print it."

"You owe me one."

Yamaguchi Mami, age 16, left giggling.

Did she part her hair on the side, held in place with a hair-clip, to highlight her lack of vulnerability? Her hair was swept back behind her ears, leaving her news gathering antennae fully open. Her onee-sama, newspaper club president Tsukiyama Minako-sama, had taught her to be ready, because she could run into newsworthy material anytime, anywhere. But, for some reason, Mami-san seemed even more resolute than Minako-sama.

"Ahh."

Yumi sighed. She had no luck at all, being put in the same class as the future head of the newspaper club.

On top of that.

Click.

"Thanks for that gloomy face."

While Yumi may have become accustomed to it, the photography club's ace, and current vice-president, Takeshima Tsutako-san was also in her class.

"I'll call it, "The Melancholy of Rosa Chinensis en Bouton." Will you let me show it at the school festival if it comes out well?"

"... Give me a break."

There was no such thing as privacy in the second-year pine class.

"We'll talk later."

Yoshino-san whispered into Yumi's ear then walked away. Tsutako-san hid her camera and quickly returned to her seat too.

The teacher for their next subject had been spotted walking down the corridor. She was also in charge of educational guidance, and an incredibly difficult teacher, so everyone reacted quickly.

In this manner, with both annoyance and pleasure, Fukuzawa Yumi's new school year began.

Part 2.

"Shimako-san's changed? In what way?"

Yoshino-san asked. At the bathroom basin, as she scrubbed with a sponge.

"Like she's dejected, or she's got no energy."

Yumi's cleaning duty for today was to polish the rectangular mirror above the basin. That and empty the bathroom bin.

"Dejected. No energy. And?"

Moving her hand, Yoshino-san urged her to continue. There was no reason they had to hold this conversation here, but there was the pseudo-paparazzi in the classroom and they could only have it in the Rose Mansion when Shimako-san herself wasn't there, and since they were in the same cleaning group it just turned out this way.

"During recess yesterday, I called out to Shimako-san when she was looking out the hallway window, but she didn't notice me at all."

"Hmm."

"True story. Whenever she has free time, Shimako-san goes to the back of the school building alone to look at cherry blossoms. Katsura-san from wisteria class told me today."

Squeak, squeak. Wielding a wet cloth in one hand and a dry cloth in the other, Yumi polished the mirror. The mirrors in the student toilets at a girls' school were under closer scrutiny than the classroom blackboards. Cloudiness or traces of water were to be avoided as much as possible.

"Cherry blossoms ... I see."

Yoshino-san gave an exaggerated nod, showing her understanding.

"What, what?"

Yumi frantically asked. Was it comprehension or deduction? Either way, slow people had to desperately run to keep up with their perceptive friends.

"The cherry blossoms played an important role in Shimako-san and Sei-sama's first meeting."

Scrub, scrub. Yoshino-san spoke the name of Shimako-san's onee-sama, who had graduated in spring.

"Really?"

Polish, polish.

"That's why they went back to the place from their memories, beneath the cherry tree, for the rosary ceremony. Didn't you know?"

Scrub, scrub, scrub.

"I see ... "

So that's why Shimako-san was beneath the cherry tree ... as Yumi was considering this, a question suddenly bubbled up.

"But they became soeurs in fall, right? Just before myself and Sachiko-sama."

Polish, polish, polish.

"It's just the place from their memories. Whether the cherry tree was blossoming or not wasn't the question."

"Their memories ... "

They both stopped working and looked up. There was only the ceiling and fluorescent lights there, but for a moment they felt they could see the cherry blossom tree branches in full bloom that Shimako-san was looking up at.

"Even now, she may be immersed in her memories."

"Maybe you're right. She could be trying to bury the loneliness caused by her onee-sama's absence."

Shimako-san herself had said it in the past. "When my onee-sama graduates, I'll have nothing tying me to the Yamayurikai."

"Because Rosa Giga ... no, Satou Sei-sama's left."

Maybe she was spacing out because she'd lost sight of her reason for being in the Yamayurikai. Or maybe she was worried about something.

"The cherry blossoms will fall soon. I wonder what will happen then."

"Who knows. At they very least, your onee-sama, Sachiko-sama, should cheer up."

"... I guess."

"When Sachiko-sama's not feeling well, it seems to throw you out of rhythm. It's no fun being with her, right Yumi-san?"

"No way, it's always fun."

Because they hardly ever spent time together. Nowadays.

There was barely time to take a breath after the successful completion of the graduation ceremony before they were assailed by waves of end-of-year exams. Yumi had expected they'd do something fun during spring break, but, as usual, there had been no such invitation forthcoming. She'd even boldly called Sachiko-sama's house a couple of times, but unluckily they'd been out each time. They may have taken a long trip, because there was no return phone call from Sachiko-sama either.

That was how the short spring break ended, bringing them to the present.

"Huh!? Y— "

Yoshino-san raised her voice and Yumi hastily moved to cover her mouth. – But just as she was about to do this, Yumi remembered she was still holding the two cleaning cloths, so changed her tactic to holding both sides of Yoshino-san's face like tongs picking up bread. The sound that had escaped from Yoshino-san during her momentary indecision echoed oddly around the bathroom.

"You did nothing for White Day?"

Yoshino-san's face, changed into a handball ball, groaned, "Unbelievable." That word had been appearing an awful lot recently. Yoshino-san's common sense and Yumi's common sense were quite different. Particularly with regard to the way soeurs should be.

"It's fine. More or less. We had our date for Valentine's Day."

"Valentine's Day is Valentine's Day, White Day is White Day. Geeze, what is Sachiko-sama thinking?"

"... Probably nothing."

At the very least, nothing about Yumi. Her depression about the cherry blossoms was probably something like hay-fever. The symptoms were flu-like. But it wasn't an allergy, so there wasn't any specific medicine for it.

It affected Sachiko-sama's mood, and she'd become lethargic, irritable, and tired. Exhausted of all physical strength. So all Yumi could do as her petit soeur was pray that the cherry blossom season would end soon.

In truth, Yumi would have been happy with this Sachiko-sama. Even just for a day during spring break, like on their first date, just being together. She would have been happy with that.

"Anyway, Yumi-san, let's just keep a watch on the situation until the cherry blossoms fall."

Yoshino-san used her own strength to escape from Yumi's grasp and breathed a sigh of relief.

"If Shimako-san returns to her usual self when the cherry blossoms fall, then all's good. Otherwise, we'll have a talk with Rei-chan and Sachiko-sama, assuming she's recovered by then."

"... Alright."

Yumi thought that that was all they could do too.

Sounds about right.

Cherry blossoms.

The first thing to do was get rid of the cherry blossoms.

The face looking back at her in the polished mirror still looked a tad uneasy.

* * *

As she was taking the trash bag to the rubbish collection area around the back of the school building, Yumi unexpectedly spotted Shimako-san.

"Shima ... "

She started to call out, but stopped.

Just like Katsura-san had said, Shimako-san seemed to be there in body but not in mind, as she staggered along beneath the cherry trees like a sleepwalker.

Cherry blossoms swirled around her, as though Shimako-san herself was scattering them.

Shimako-san caught them in her palms, closing her eyes from time to time, showering her entire body in the petal snow. For just a moment, Yumi saw the face of the previous Rosa Gigantea, Satou Sei-sama, overlaying Shimako-san's. Yumi couldn't help but think that Shimako-san was thinking of her onee-sama.

That was why she couldn't call out to her.

Because Shimako-san was sad, and still too beautiful. Yumi couldn't intrude into her private world.

The cherry blossoms would fall soon.

What would happen to Shimako-san then?

Shimako-san walked towards the auditorium, as though she was chasing cherry trees that hadn't yet lost most of their flowers.

Yumi hurried over to the rubbish collection area, left the trash bag and quickly returned. When she got back to the spot she was earlier, Shimako-san was nowhere to be seen.

Yumi could guess where Shimako-san had gone, but she didn't intend to chase after her. When she reached the front of the auditorium, she kept following the path to the right.

On the far side of the hedge, the vivid colors of street clothes kept drawing her attention.

Part 3.

"You know, Yumi-chan."

She spoke slowly, as though admonishing a three year old.

"I know. You told me I couldn't rely on you after you graduated."

"... So you seem to understand."

Letting out a sigh of amazement, she treated Yumi to a cafe au lait in a takeaway cup, as Yumi sat uncomfortably at a round table in the cafeteria.

"My deepest apologies that canned sweet red-bean soup isn't available during this season."

Was she being serious or sarcastic when she said this? Probably the latter.

"Ha. Thank-you."

Despite her thirst, Yumi blew on the coffee to cool it down before indulging.

She'd blindly run around the university buildings but hadn't found the person she was looking for. Somewhere in the back of her mind she knew that university students didn't stay in the one classroom for all their subjects, but Yumi was naïve enough to think, "I'll find her straight away."

To begin with, starting a manhunt across the vast campus knowing only her target's name and major was an exercise in futility. She didn't have a car with a bull horn, so going around shouting out her name wouldn't be all that fun, and she couldn't go into any of the classrooms either. For one thing, Yumi wasn't even exactly clear on whether or not she would be on campus.

But still they'd met like this because, luckily, Yumi had run into some recent graduates who had brought her here. If not for that, she probably wouldn't have found the former Rosa Gigantea, Satou Sei-sama, any time today. Sadly, Sei-sama had been laughing it up with her university friends, so it wasn't an emotional reunion.

"And? If you knew how I'd react, why did you come here Yumi-chan?"

"Will you help with a serious situation involving Shimako-san?"

"A serious situation with Shimako-san? Is she talking about leaving school?"

"No, nothing like that."

Yumi mumbled, then took another sip of her cafe au lait. Rosa Gigantea still had it. She'd added enough sugar to perfectly match Yumi's tastes.

"You know, it's pretty common for teenage girls to stare at cherry blossoms, lost in thought. Everyone does it."

"I'm certain that Shimako-san wants to see you, Rosa Gigantea. But she's fighting it."

"She's hardly doing much of that. It's only been a month."

Sei-sama quipped. She'd cut her hair a lot shorter than before. Her white shirt and jeans outfit was simple, but all the more adult. It may seem obvious, but she looked like a regular university student. It didn't feel as though, up until a month ago, she'd been wearing the same uniform as Yumi.

"It's because you're injudiciously close."

The high-school buildings and university buildings were right next to each other. Close enough to see someone at any time, if you wanted to. Like Yumi right now.

"Injudicious, huh. Yumi-chan, you know some difficult words."

"Rosa Gigantea, stop making fun of me."

"I'm not really making fun of you ... and could you stop calling me "Rosa Gigantea?""

Indeed, Shimako-san was now Rosa Gigantea, and while Yumi knew this intellectually it was difficult for her to make the switch. Because, for Yumi, there was a long history of using Rosa Gigantea to refer to Satou Sei-sama.

"Then should I call you Sei-sama?"

"Hmm. That's also a bit ... "

Sei-sama was still hesitating. Perhaps she wanted to avoid anything that seemed like an extension of high-school.

"Then what would you like me to call you?"

Yumi was in a mood to say, "Just tell me already." But of course she was here to ask a favor, so she made sure her blunt words stayed just as thoughts and weren't spoken.

"Sei-san. Or Satou-san. Actually, I'm on a bit of a Satou-san kick at the moment."

"Huh."

Students who came to Lillian's university from other schools via the entrance exam system probably wouldn't know about Lillian's high-school traditions, so they'd probably call each other by their surname. It seemed somehow fresh and pleasant.

"Satou-sa~n. Biology's next, are you coming?"

The group that Sei-sama had been with earlier were all standing up, cleaning away their empty coffee cups, snacks, candy wrappers and other trash.

"Ah, I'm coming, I'm coming. Save me a seat."

Indeed, it was "Satou-san."

"Sorry, Yumi-chan. It's the first lecture, so I can't skip it."

Sei-sama held up a hand in the pose of apology and winked. Then she downed the rest of her cup of black coffee in one swig, gathered her belongings and stood up.

"You're majoring in English, but you've got a Biology lecture?"

"First-years have to take some general subjects. It's not that different to high-school."

"Oh, I see."

Even if it wasn't that different, Sei-sama was no longer a high-school student – she'd made new friends and was spending her time as a university student well.

It made Yumi feel a bit sorry for Shimako-san. It was unfair. Does the bond between soeurs naturally dissolve upon graduation?

It was fine for the one who left. But what should the one who was left behind do?

When the flowers blossomed or when snow fell, she wanted her to hold in her heart the visions of one year earlier when they'd watched those same scenes together. Well, Sei-sama had probably gone through the same experience herself. But with the start of her new life, she seemed to have forgotten those old feelings.

"See ya."

"... Bye."

Watching her go, Yumi felt lonelier and lonelier. She wanted to cry. Shimako-san's current state was nothing more than Yumi's state one year hence, after she'd been abandoned by Sachiko-sama.

"Ah, that's right."

Sei-sama suddenly turned around.

"You don't have to coddle her too much."

"Huh?"

"Shimako-san."

"Ah – "

Even though she'd said not to rely on her, Sei-sama was still thinking of Shimako-san.

"So there's no pressure on you to rescue Shimako-san from her crisis. If you're thinking about taking it all on yourself, you're barking up the wrong tree."

"... The wrong tree."

"If there's something only you can do then you should act, but until then you should stay neutral."

"But."

Would the time come when she had to act? And what should she do if she couldn't recognize when that time came?

Sei-sama laughed as Yumi thought this through.

"Don't worry about it. Even if you don't act, someone else might. In that case, can you support them? The right person in the right place, and all that."

"Hah."

"Do you understand?"

"... A little."

"Good. That's about as much as me then."

Sei-sama gently stroked Yumi's cheek, then disappeared down the hallway at a jog, shouting out, "Oh no, I'm late."

"Late ... ah!"

That's when Yumi remembered.

"— oh dear."

There was supposed to be a meeting in the Rose Mansion once cleaning was over.

Part 4.

Since the error was obviously on her part, Sachiko-sama would naturally be angry. But this was far more dreadful than a furiously raging Sachiko-sama – such were Yumi's thoughts.

"Now where could you have been, I wonder."

Waiting for her on the other side of the biscuit door was a gaze completely lacking in intensity. No imposing stance, just her hands folded in front of her. Yumi would have preferred a scolding, but she could tell that Sachiko-sama didn't have the energy for that.

"I'm terribly sorry."

As usual, Yumi started by apologizing and bowed her head energetically. First comes the apology. Then the excuse. Just like in sports.

"Please don't respond to my question in a way that doesn't answer it."

"Okay, sorry."

"So, your whereabouts?"

She'd changed from "where" to "whereabouts." Perhaps she was going to change from "Yumi" to "Yumi-san" in the near future. That would be too terrible. Since she didn't have the energy to descend into hysterics, Sachiko-sama seemed to have changed her modus operandi to pedantic torture.

The atmosphere was such that Yumi wouldn't get forgiveness without offering up some kind of explanation.

"On my way back from dropping off the trash, I ran into some people and we started talking – "

"So you unintentionally overlooked the time we were supposed to meet?"

"Yes."

Hearing that, Sachiko-sama gave a very small nod. But her face still looked like a terrifying Noh mask.

"Who was it?"

"Um, it was a friend from a different grade ... "

On the spur of the moment, she lied. Well, it wasn't a lie. Satou-sama was in a different grade after all, and friend had a broad meaning so she was one of them too.

"I see."

Sachiko-sama sighed in resignation and the conversation ended. It looked like Yumi had been saved by the cherry blossoms.

Sachiko-sama hated cherry blossoms.

She hated their taste and watching them fall.

Buddhist priests and their robes too. – Although there were none of those at the catholic girls' school that was Lillian's Girls Academy.

But, with things how they were, the reaction when she recovered would be frightening. And without a severe scolding, Yumi couldn't get her rhythm back either. Oh dear, familiarity was a terrifying thing.

Tee-hee.

Suddenly, the mysterious sound of laughter reached Yumi's ears. She became a bit worried, because the laugh contained a trace of malice.

Tee-hee. Tee-hee.

The unpleasant laughter echoed around the second-floor of the Rose Mansion.

"Touko-chan."

Sachiko-sama turned around, challenging the laugh's originator. It was then that Yumi finally noticed the student sitting with her back to her. It wasn't Rei-sama or Shimako-san.

"But Sachiko onee-sama, she's so funny."

Slowly, the girl turned to look at Yumi, revealing her strong-willed brow.
(Wh-what did she ... !?)

Blood rushed into Yumi's head. Not due to the cold and provocative way the girl was looking at her, but the words she'd spat out.

(Sa-sa-sachiko onee-sama !?)



It was acceptable to refer to a group of older students as "onee-samas." But only an officially recognized petit soeur, who had accepted their rosary, was allowed to call a specific older student "onee-sama." That is, in Sachiko-sama's case, it was unforgivable for anyone other than Yumi to call her that.

"Touko-chan, you shouldn't be calling me that."

There, told you so. Sachiko-sama's strict and welcome guidance burst forth. But this "Touko-chan" wasn't even slightly discouraged. She played with her hair rolls, looking off into the distance blankly. Annoyingly, her actions were kind of cutesy.

"But you've always been called that, it's hard for Touko to suddenly stop."

(Wh-what? She said she's always called her that? This girl.)

"At least while we're at school, call me "Sachiko-sama" or "Rosa Chinensis." Public and private life have to be kept separate."

(Onee-sama, what are you saying ... !)

The impact hit Yumi like a hammer to the head. Was the delineation Sachiko-sama was making that Yumi was "public" and this Touko-chan with her ringlets was "private," or not? No, that was it. Clearly.

Public, formal, official. Public meant out in the open, and that wasn't bad, but it felt like it was no match for private, with its connotations of secrecy and concealment.

Private property, private life, private affairs... see.

(– but, more importantly.)

Sachiko-sama was an only child, so she shouldn't have a little sister in her private life. That someone not in her immediate family could so brazenly call her "onee-sama." What on earth was going on here.

"Let me introduce you, Yumi. This is Matsudaira Touko-chan, a first-year. She said she wanted to see the Rose Mansion, so I invited her."

"... Pleased to meet you."

Since her onee-sama had made the introduction, Yumi had to offer a greeting. But Touko-chan didn't even bother to look at Yumi, instead coiling herself around Sachiko-sama's arm and saying, like a spoiled child:

"Oh my. You weren't going to mention that we're related?"

"Ah, right. Actually, Touko-chan's related on my father's side of the family."

Sachiko-sama added, and Touko-chan looked at Yumi triumphantly.

"Related? I wonder how distantly."

Yoshino-san said, jumping into the conversation. Apparently Touko-chan had been introduced to her earlier, but this was the first time that Yoshino-san had heard she was related to Sachiko-sama.

"I'm Sachiko onee-sama's father's older sister's husband's younger sister's daughter."

"So basically, you're not blood related at all."

Incredible, Yoshino-san. She'd instantly understood Touko-chan's rapid-fire explanation.

"But it doesn't change the fact that we're related."

"Sure, distant relatives."

Touko-chan sparred with Yoshino-san. They glared at each other, sparks flying between them, then both suddenly looked away. Like two cats hissing at each other.

"Well, anyway, onee-sama. About today's meeting ..."

Yumi nervously broached the topic, since she was late arriving. She had to defuse the tense atmosphere somehow. Sorry Touko-chan, but the best solution was for you to leave for the justifiable reason of the scheduled meeting.

"Ah, right."

Sachiko-sama clapped.

"Today's meeting's canceled."

"Huh!?"

"The kendo club's faculty member and club president were both absent today, so Rei had to go and lead the training."

"They've had some new students join and there's not that many club members that could lead them."

Yoshino-san grumbled about her busy onee-sama too.

"No way."

"So there you have it."

So there she had it.

So where did that leave Yumi, with her onee-sama nitpicking her about being late? However, it would also be foolish not to confirm the members that had been captivated by Touko-chan. When she asked, she found out that Shimako-san had also been there, but had left once she found out the meeting was canceled.

"At any rate, this mansion is sooo comfy. Touko likes it and will have to visit again."

(Hey, hey. Ask if you can come and visit. You're a younger student.)

Perhaps this was how generational change happened. Yumi's heart was filled with a phrase she'd never had cause to use before, "Kids these days ..."

However, Sachiko-sama was sweet. Sweeter than a sweet bean jelly.

"Occasionally."

It was a slight rebuff, but her eyes and mouth were smiling.

"Yumi-san, you'd better watch out for that Touko."

Yoshino-san whispered, leaning in close to Yumi.

"If you're careless, you could have your onee-sama stolen."

"Huh!? Huh!? Huuuh!?"

Despite being surprised by this extreme advice from her friend, a yellow warning light went on somewhere in Yumi's heart.

(Danger.)

Touko-chan was innocently assertive.

(To make matters worse.)

"Hey, would it be possible to visit your house today, Sachiko onee-sama? It would be nice to see grandfather and Sayako oba-sama, since it's been so long."

"I suppose."

Sachiko-sama was confused, but she didn't clearly decline.

It looked like the jinx of third-years being overly indulgent to first-years applied to Sachiko-sama too.

8 - 3 = Right

Part 1.

" – So, the priest will bring the medallions on the day of the event, and we'll have to meet him and take delivery of them. This job will be entrusted to the boutons."

The good old second-floor of the Rose Mansion.

"Next is the rose corsages for us to wear."

Shimako-san explained the arrangements for the Yamayurikai organized first-year welcoming ceremony.

"Roses ... do you think it's necessary to use fresh flowers? Just as long as they're obviously our colors, that should be enough right? If we went with artificial flowers, they could be reused next year and the year after."

Rei-sama muttered, tapping on the report paper with a mechanical pencil.

Today was the kendo club's day off. Consequently, they'd reconvened the meeting that had been canceled the other day.

"Artificial flowers?"

Sachiko-sama thumped the table. Her whole body screamed, "You expect me to wear an artificial flower!?"

As expected from a true upper-class daughter. But in that case, what was she going to do about graduation, when they did traditionally use artificial flowers? Even as she was thinking these extraneous thoughts, Yumi felt a little relieved.

Sachiko-sama was getting her health back. She wasn't in perfect condition, but she had more or less returned to normal.

Because the reviled cherry blossom season was almost over.

Yumi hadn't been able to observe Sachiko-sama up close this time last year, but she fully expected that Sachiko-sama would continue to improve until the ginkgo nuts ripened in the fall.

"Well, I'm not saying we have to go with artificial flowers. But fresh ones are a bother. I'm just suggesting we consider it."

Rei-sama stressed, seeing it through to the end.

"In that case, I vote against it."

Even though nobody had said anything about having a vote. The way Sachiko-sama announced that she wasn't planning on changing her mind no matter what counter-arguments were offered was either honesty or stubbornness.

"Rosa Chinensis votes for fresh flowers."

Shimako-san laughed and recorded Sachiko-sama's vote in the meeting minutes. This was either due to sympathy or just because she was too serious.

(Huh?)

There were some cherry petals buried in Shimako-san's fluffy hair. Unusually, she'd been about five minutes late to the meeting, so she must have been beneath the cherry trees again.

Yumi tilted her head sideways in confusion.

About 80% of the cherry blossom petals had already fallen. And yet, Shimako-san didn't seem to be brooding. On the contrary, she was in high spirits. Cheerfully advancing the meeting, as though something good had happened to her.

Incomprehensible.

Although that was how she'd always been – Shimako-san's patterns of thought and action were inscrutable.

"What do you think, Yumi?"

"Huh?"

Suddenly hearing her name called, Yumi hastily stood up.

"... You're not in class now."

"Ah, right. Sorry."

So sit down.

"We're discussing whether to go with real or fake flowers."

Yoshino-san whispered, as though informing her classmate which page of the textbook they were on.

"The artificial flower corsages are more expensive, but they have the advantage of being reusable ... "

Before Shimako-san could finish her explanation, Yumi shouted out "Real flowers!"

"Huh?"

"Um ... I'd prefer real flowers."

"Why?"

Sachiko-sama asked with a sharp gaze that indicated she wouldn't accept the answer, "Because my onee-sama prefers fresh flowers."

"Well, at last year's welcoming ceremony, the Roses and boutons had real flowers, and they were really beautiful and moving. And then, when I was welcomed by them as the leaders of the entire student body, I was really happy, well, how should I put it ... um."

She wanted the juniors to have those feelings too.

"I see."

Despite its incoherence, Sachiko-sama quietly listened to Yumi's speech and nodded.

"I know what you mean. Yoshino-chan, did you feel the same last year?"

"There was definitely something like that, right?"

Yoshino-san fished for Shimako-san's agreement. But Shimako-san's response was:

"I'm sorry. I don't remember the particulars of that event."

"Why not?"

Yumi asked. It was only one year ago. Shimako-san herself seemed somewhat doubtful, saying, "I wonder why."

"Probably because you were fixated on a certain somebody, no?"

Hearing Sachiko-sama's callous remark, Yumi and Yoshino-san were taken aback, as was Rei-sama who must have heard something from Yoshino-san. Speaking, or even hinting, about that "certain somebody" was

prohibited in front of Shimako-san, who was thought to be feeling uneasy about the falling cherry blossoms. But apparently Sachiko-sama wasn't aware of that. She probably hadn't paid attention to any gossip for the entire time that the cherry flowers had been blooming.

"Huh?"

Shimako-san blinked, taken aback. Her expression clearly showing that she was thinking about that "certain somebody."

Had she stepped on a land mine? Was she going to explode?

But what on earth would a Shimako-san explosion look like? – No-one there had ever seen one before, that was for sure.

Yumi's heart was racing. Dormant volcanoes erupted far more violently than active ones.

As for Shimako-san.

"Ah, right. That may be it."

She uttered ecstatically, contrary to the expectations of everyone that had been watching on with bated breath.

"Sh-Shimako-san ... ? Hello?"

That may be it? Did you understand that she meant you were fixated on Sei-sama?

Speaking as though it were a compliment. It was hard to tell if this was due to Shimako-san's composure, or if she'd spoken improperly due to the comfortable condition in her mind.

However, Shimako-san completely missed the reaction from the outfield.

"So Sachiko-sama and Yumi-san are voting for fresh flowers."

She added a vertical line next to the earlier recorded vote, making a T shape.

"Yoshino-san?"

"Real flowers are fine."

A second horizontal line was added, turning it into an odd looking F.

"Well, I wasn't insisting that we had to go with artificial flowers."

Rei-sama also agreed with fresh flowers, and then Shimako-san added her own vote, making the result the kanji character for correct, 正. Just like that, the decision was unanimous.

"Then we shall continue the tradition of using real flowers for the corsage."

All the attendees in just one character. With only five people, differences of opinion were quickly settled. It had the advantage that it made the meetings quick, but it was a little bit sad too.

"We've settled on fresh flowers for the Roses."

Yoshino-san said, her hand raised.

"But what are we going to do for the boutons? Last year there were a lot of people near me who were confused. The Roses wore blooming flowers in their respective color and the boutons wore flowers that hadn't blossomed yet, but it was hard to tell from a distance."

Indeed. If the boutons flowers were too small then it would be hard to make out the color, but if they were too big then they'd be too hard to differentiate from the Roses.

In Yoshino-san's case, she was already Rei-sama's petit soeur by the time of the welcoming ceremony, so she would have known who the Roses were. But, generally speaking, the welcoming ceremony was the first opportunity the new freshmen had to see the members of the Yamayurikai.

"The first-years didn't participate in last year's election, and the point of the welcoming ceremony is to introduce the Yamayurikai, so I think we should make it more obvious."

So Yoshino-san proposed that the boutons didn't wear corsages of the same color as the Roses.

"Our role as boutons is a minor one for this event."

At the group wedding of the Yamayurikai executives and the first-year students. Indeed, the boutons were second-in-command. Despite the way she was always talking, Yoshino-san seemed to understand this.

"Sounds good."

Sachiko-sama nodded in admiration too.

"But it'd be better if there was something to identify you as our assistants."

Rei-sama had a point too. The conversation continued while Yumi sat there looking bewildered. But there was no way someone who didn't raise their hand during class discussions could keep up with this pace.

"So if we exclude the colors red, white, and yellow, then – "

"Salmon pink!"

Yumi shouted, not wanting to miss her chance. She felt bad that she hadn't been participating in the meeting. But she had raised her hand properly.

Had her voice been too loud? For a moment, the place fell silent.

"Ah ... um?"

Finally.

"Right. That would be fine."

Sachiko-sama smiled gently. Rei-sama, Shimako-san and Yoshino-san gave a nod of approval too.

Salmon pink was a mixture of red, white and yellow. So it was like it was the color of their team.

"Their team." Yumi was once again reminded of the fact.

Until now, it had been eight people.

Three graduated, and now there were five. It was a bit too sparsely populated, so there was room for other people to enter, but just quietly Yumi liked the space.

Was a petit soeur really necessary?

Sei-sama and Sachiko-sama had taken their time getting a petit soeur, and while they may not have felt exactly the same as Yumi, it probably wasn't a completely different feeling either.

If it's just these people here with me, then I'm fine with that – such was Yumi's desire.

At the time when their five opinions had become one.

Shimako-san and Yoshino-san would surely have felt the same way.

Part 2.

Yoshino-san's warning had most definitely not been forgotten.

But while she was being careful, it wasn't something she was constantly thinking about.

Those ringlets. Touko-chan.

Perhaps she'd been following Sachiko-sama's directive of only showing up "occasionally," because she hadn't been back to the Rose Mansion until now. But she kept catching them by surprise, by showing up at unexpected times in unexpected places.

For example, the day before yesterday.

By chance, Yumi and Sachiko-sama happened to be heading home together when they ran into Touko-chan at the main building entrance, as though she'd planned it.

"Shall we head home together? Touko was kept back late with club activities."

Hearing that, it was kind of hard to say, "Walk home alone, you're getting in our way." Sachiko-sama showed no hesitation before allowing her to accompany them.

"You said you were in a club, which one did you join?"

"The drama club. Sachiko onee- ... ah, Sachiko-sama."

She'd been in the drama club ever since upper elementary school. Her favorite role so far was when she played Sara from A Little Princess in her second-year of middle-school. Her most boring role was "Sleeping Beauty" in sixth-grade of elementary school. Because she spent most of her time sleeping and had very few lines.

– Touko-chan enthusiastically told Sachiko-sama all this and more.

Yumi was right there as Touko-chan followed "Sachiko onee-sama" around, but nothing Touko-chan said was of interest to her so all Yumi could do was trudge along like an extra, with Touko-chan's report as background music.

(Serenity now, serenity now.)

Yumi mentally recited. Touko-chan was simply happy to see her beloved relative. It would be absurd to get flustered because of that. As the petit soeur who received the rosary, she had to show more presence of mind.

"Touko always thought that in high-school she'd be in a club with Sachiko onee-sama. So it came as quite a shock at lunch when you said you weren't in any clubs. You stopped all your extra-curricular lessons too, so Touko can't join in there either."

"Yamayurikai work keeps me busy."

"Then Touko will help out there."

Touko-chan said like a spoiled child, linking her arm around Sachiko-sama's.

(Se-serenity now, serenity now.)

"If you have that much free time, you should devote it to the drama club."

"Oh, but Rosa Foetida's also in the kendo club, isn't she? Touko thought she could be helpful to Sachiko onee-sama."

"If the time comes, I'll ask you."

"Alright."

Serenity now, serenity now. But when Yumi heard that they'd met at lunchtime, that spell was instantly broken.

Even today.

At the end of the lunch break, as they were making their way from the Rose Mansion through the courtyard, there was a loud voice coming from above for some reason. Turning to look at the source, there was Touko-chan standing on the external fire-escape stairs, waving and shouting.

"Onee-samas, thanks for all your hard work!"

Naturally, those words of appreciation were directed to the three Roses walking in front. Her performance was way too overboard, and she stood out far too much.

* * *

"That Touko-chan, she's totally after it."

Yoshino-san said, looking solemn.

"After what?"

About the same time that Yumi asked this, Yoshino-san provided a clear explanation.

"A petit soeur spot."

"Wh-who's?"

Yumi raised her head from writing in the duty log. The lead in her pencil snapped.

"Well, let's see ... "

Yoshino-san grabbed one of her braids by the tip and stroked her cheek like she was applying rouge.

"It's certainly not the Yellow Rose family."

"How do you know that?"

"Our personalities clash. You must have seen it, right? The way she was snarling at me."

"Yeah, I guess."

Yumi tentatively agreed. Touko-chan had just been matching Yoshino-san's snarling, though. But now that she'd escaped to a safe place, Yoshino-san assumed the high moral ground.

Like now. How she was looking down on her friend writing in the duty log.

"..."

There was a melancholy to the classroom after school had let out for the day. It was like the haiku, "Summer grasses, All that remains Of soldiers' dreams" – although they hadn't had traditional Japanese today. There were only a handful of students remaining in the second-year pine classroom, most had already left. Some had gone home, others to club activities.

She fondly remembered this melancholic feeling.

Usually she'd go to the Rose Mansion after school, but today all three of the Roses had other things to do so there was no meeting. Since she was on duty, Yumi hung around writing in the duty log, and Yoshino-san kept her company.

"So when you said she's after a petit soeur spot ... did you perhaps mean Shimako-san's?"

Yumi timidly ventured. While Shimako-san was also a second-year, she was already Rosa Gigantea, so in a sense she was most in need of a petit soeur. And since Touko-chan had already said that she wanted to help out at the Rose Mansion, their interests were fully aligned. Fully aligned, but –

Was there really that much contact between the two? Until now, she'd never even considered the possibility of Shimako-san and Touko-chan becoming soeurs.

"Or Yumi-san's."

"Huh!?"

Yumi's instinctive reaction was disbelief, and she nearly fell off her chair. But Yoshino-san didn't seem to be lying or joking, as she coolly watched Yumi's agitation and quietly said:

"In name only. If she becomes your petit soeur, then Sachiko-sama will dote on her, right?"

Indeed, to become a member of the Yamayurikai it was necessary to become one of their petit soeurs. To accomplish that, she'd have to target one of the older students without a petit soeur, and if Yoshino-san and Shimako-san were excluded then that left –

Yumi shivered all over. Using her to become Sachiko-sama's "granddaughter." That such a person could exist.

"Or a hostile takeover."

"H-hostile takeover!?"

Again, Yoshino-san was scaring her with those terrible words.

"She might kick you out of the way and run for Rosa Chinensis en bouton."

"No way."

"It's not impossible. Sachiko-sama could get you to give the rosary back, and then hand it over to Touko-chan. It's a more direct method than aiming for "grand-daughter.""

"Oooh – "

This was strangely persuasive coming from someone who had once returned their rosary to their "onee-sama."

"But, well, it's fine as long as I don't give the rosary back, right?"

Yumi made a show of laughing it off. It was more for her own self-confidence than anything else.

"Yumi-san, do you really have that self belief?"

"Huh?"

""Touko's always been better suited to Sachiko onee-sama than you.""

Yoshino-san imitated Touko-chan's voice, playing cute.

"Ooh."

""How can Yumi-sama possibly be up to the task?""

"St-st-"

"... Would you still be able to stand up to her if she said that?"

" – Hold on, this rosary carries a heavy responsibility."

But this was a hypothetical conversation.

Assuming Touko-chan wanted to join the Rose Mansion, that didn't mean she'd already decided to target Sachiko-sama. Obviously, she'd never even talked about dislodging Yumi.

"By the way, who will we ask to help?"

"Huh?"

After all this idle chatter, Yoshino-san suddenly changed topic.

Yumi felt exhausted, since it looked like all the talk about Touko-chan launching a hostile takeover had just been a way to waste time. She'd been a fool to take it seriously and worry about this and that.

"Come on, hurry up with the duty log. If we don't think of someone today, we can't negotiate with them tomorrow, right?"

"... Right."

Yumi and Yoshino-san had been given the homework task of scouting one person to assist them. Shimako-san was Rosa Gigantea, but she was also a second-year like Yumi, so didn't yet have a petit soeur. The tradition was that the Roses would place a medallion around the necks of every first-year, and it was vital that they each had someone to assist them.

"We're supposed to choose, since they'll have to work closely with us boutons, right?"

"... Yeah. But will we find someone who wants to do it?"

Naturally, it would be unpaid work. And they'd be standing alongside Shimako-san. Shimako-san said she was entrusting this task to them, but people she approached had probably kept their distance. It wasn't that anyone disliked her, but she was incredibly beautiful.

(Although I'm used to it by now.)

Standing beside a beautiful person.

""Beauty, bouton's private conversation.""

Click.

The pair squinted at the dazzling flash.

"Ah!"

They both must have had the same thought, because they simultaneously stood up and crowded around the newcomer.

"Wait, Tsutako-san."

"Wh-what's this about?"

Seeing their unusual reaction, Tsutako-san panicked and held her camera up high with both hands, in a rather odd pose.

"Are you free on the afternoon of the Maria Ceremony?"

" – How could I be? The photography club's involved in the first-years' welcoming ceremony too, you know."

Hearing that answer, Yoshino-san and Yumi sighed in despair. While it wasn't something Tsutako-san would have been overjoyed to accept, they had expected she would do so because of their history together.

"... I see."

Tsutako-san the photography ace wouldn't be without her camera for the main event of the welcoming ceremony, the handing out of medallions.

"Then how about we ask Katsura-san? She's in Shimako-san's class."

"So what's this about?"

Tsutako-san finally lowered her camera back to waist height as she asked this question.

"We're looking for an assistant. Someone to stand in for Shimako-san's petit soeur ... "

Yoshino-san got that far when they heard the sound of laughter coming from someone else.

"Hohoho. I heard that, everyone."

"Ma-Mami-san."

What the heck, was she always just lurking around waiting to appear? It was a mystery. Incidentally, this time she'd appeared from somewhere behind Tsutako-san, but – .

"You're all so distant. I'd pitch in and help if only you'd ask me."

"But, but, the newspaper club is covering the event."

Yumi and Yoshino-san naturally backed away. It was impossible to tell what Mami-san was thinking. For one thing, their relationship wasn't that distant at all.

"Well of course we're covering it. But we're not going to be writing articles during the event. My onee-sama ... the club president will surely be running around everywhere like a chicken with her head chopped off."

"..."

Yumi could just imagine it, but she couldn't respond. Tsukiyama Minako-sama was that type of person.

"So I was thinking I should cover it from inside, for when she strikes out. By using the view from inside the welcoming ceremony, I can cover it brilliantly. And because I'm coming at it from a different angle, she won't be hurt as much if I write a better article than her."

"..."

All three were thinking that she was a wonderful petit soeur. But even more frightening. Minako-sama was simple and easy to understand, but Mami-san was ominous because no-one could tell what she was thinking.

"Let me just say straight away, we can't pay you for this."

Yoshino-san cut straight to the point, and clapped her hands together in a "Let's do business" gesture. The task of finding an assistant had been entrusted to the boutons.

It seemed the mood had shifted from one of complete opposition, but even at the start that hadn't been Yumi's position. Mami-san would do the job well. She probably wouldn't lie or exaggerate in her article. So as long as she didn't focus on the troubles of the Yamayurikai, it should be fine to invite her inside.

They'd all be better off if the feud between the Yamayurikai and the newspaper club came to an end soon. As long as they respected each others' position, they should be able to have a good relationship, resulting in a better school newspaper and a better student council.

Part 3.

"Shimako's acting strangely."

Sachiko-sama said softly.

The second-floor of the Rose Mansion. The biscuit door, the one and only entrance, was open. So they would know if someone was climbing the stairs. This was a secret gathering.

The "someone" was Shimako-san. The members of the Red and Yellow Rose families were meeting at lunchtime, without Shimako-san. So the entire assembly was just four people.

"Um. Shimako-san's been acting strangely for a while now."

Yumi and Yoshino-san looked at each other, "Right?"

"In what way?"

"She's been spacing out, looking at the cherry blossoms."

"That's fine. It was to be expected."

Sachiko-sama waved her hand, as though she was sweeping "that" away.

"Huh?"

"When Rosa Giga ... no, when Satou Sei-sama left, I thought she would become listless like that. I suppose you could call it a reaction. Despite appearances, they'd become emotionally dependent. On each other."

Despite appearances could have referred to their hands-off or, rather, their non-clingy soeur relationship.

"Oh, really?"

"We thought she'd be overcome by it. But Shimako's behavior has changed, so we have to change our plans."

"Overcome?"

Rei-sama had a sharp tongue. What she seemed to want to say was that they were going to let her wallow in her sadness, then offer her a helping hand at an appropriate time.

"Don't you think Shimako wants her heart to be open? Until now, it's been difficult because Sei-sama had been encamped in front of the door, so our only chance was through generational change."

"Hah."

"That's what we had in mind, but that Shimako. Recently, she's been strangely happy."

Sachiko-sama thumped the table in frustration. Shimako-san seemed happy, and normally that would be fine, but apparently this had happened before their offer. On top of that, they didn't know why, which was more than Sachiko-sama could stand.

On this matter the two soeurs were alike. Sachiko-sama and Yumi both grandiosely thought they would be the one to save Shimako-san.

"How much do you two know about Shimako?"

Sachiko-sama asked abruptly, looking serious.

"Um. Well, she sees attachment as shackles, and wants to be free to go anywhere at any time. And Sei-sama said that Shimako-san thought of herself as a dog, a lone wolf that can't join a pack."

"Say what?"

Yoshino-san had an expression of utter bewilderment. A reversal of their usual roles. Yoshino-san had been in a different class during their first year of high-school, so it was only natural that she would have less information about Shimako-san.

"A lone wolf ... I see, that's an oddly fitting phrase."

"It's hard to see her as a wolf or a husky, so I don't think we should worry. Now, a chihuahua or a toy poodle, that would obviously fit."

"Don't derail the conversation, Rei."

"I'm just saying, we should focus on Shimako-san herself."

Rei-sama shrugged.

"Um ... about Shimako-san's situation, do you two ... ?"

"We're aware of it."

"W-w-w-w."

Surprised by their answer, Yumi unintentionally imitated a jackhammer.

"What's that w-w-w-w supposed to mean? Did you want to ask, "Why?" or, "What situation?""

"... Both."

Returning to her senses, Yumi blushed and looked down. Why did it always turn out like this?

"The reason Shimako's so withdrawn is that her family runs a Buddhist temple. I found this out through my grandfather on my mother's side, who's a parishioner at Shouguu ... the temple where Shimako's father is head priest."

"I heard about it from Rei. From memory, around the time of the student council elections."

Rei-sama and Sachiko-sama unemotionally explained the "circumstances."

"Ah ... so that's what it was."

It was strange, but Yumi wasn't particularly disturbed by learning Shimako-san's secret. And she was more predisposed to surprise than calm acceptance.

Apologies to Shimako-san, but Yumi's thoughts were, "Is that all?"

But Shimako-san kept it locked up inside, not telling anyone probably because she was worried about their reaction. She didn't want their pity. She was ashamed of herself for keeping her friends in the dark.

"I hadn't heard this."

While she'd been silent, Yoshino-san's cheeks had puffed up. Given the way they shared everything in their relationship, she seemed angered by Rei-sama's silence.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

She thumped her fists into Rei-sama's shoulder.

"I was keeping it from you on purpose."

"That's right. We discussed it together and decided not to tell either of you two."

With Sachiko-sama looking at her, the thumping stopped. An agitated Yoshino-san glared at the imposing Sachiko-sama and asked:

"But why?"

"Because we decided that Shimako needed normal friends. Hearing her secret would change how you interacted with her, right? Back then, Shimako had to face the ordeal of farewelling Satou Sei-sama on her own. Pity would just get in the way. We wanted her to have friends that would stand with her unconditionally, despite not knowing her circumstances. And you did."

It was hard to understand but, basically, they were the right people in the right place at the right time. Yoshino-san seemed to accept this explanation, because she silently lowered her fists.

"But why's the temple such a big deal?"

"That's because Shimako's far too serious."

"It's proof that, unlike us, she treats her religion seriously."

Unlike us. – That's right, Shimako-san was a devout Christian.

"Ah."

Yumi suddenly remembered.

"What is it?"

"That might have been why Sei-sama didn't invite her to the New Year's shrine visit ... "

"Ah. Naturally she would have known. But she graduated without doing anything."

"Leaving Shimako to handle it herself."

"Ah, um."

Hearing this stinging criticism from the two Roses, Yumi thought it was a bit unfortunate that no-one was offering a defense for Sei-sama.

"I don't think it was that she didn't do anything, but that she couldn't do anything. She understood Shimako-san too well, so she couldn't take drastic action."

But it wasn't much of a defense, because all it seemed to do was spur on their complaints.

" – Well, it's just like her to be that irresponsible. To postpone the problem, and push it onto us."

Push it onto you, Sachiko-sama? It wasn't as though Sei-sama had left you with some request regarding Shimako-san that you absolutely had to carry out.

"But now that we know about it, we have to take drastic action. Shimako's onee-sama has been silent, but we can't hold back."

Filled with fighting spirit, Sachiko-sama tried cracking her knuckles. – But, unfortunately, no sound came out.

"So, why are you telling us this now?"

"Because an opportunity has arisen."

Rei-sama answered.

"Spending all your time at school worrying is no fun, right? When she became Rosa Gigantea, we made up our mind ... it'll take drastic action? Fine, we'll do that."

"It can't be small scale. Since she's worried about it so much, it has to be done on a big stage."

Sachiko-sama sidled over to Rei-sama. They impishly glanced at each other.

"For instance, she could confess in a "Lillian Kawaraban" article."

"Or she could announce it in front of the whole school."

The two Roses counted on their fingers as they talked.

Yoshino-san loved this kind of plotting, and couldn't help but join in.

"The first-years' welcoming ceremony is coming up soon."

"Right. We thought of that, but it would be quite difficult."

Sachiko-sama stopped counting on her fingers and crossed her arms across her chest, as though in thought.

"Why?"

"Because Shimako has to say it herself. What would cause her to unravel her years of caution? She's made up her mind to drop out of school if it was ever found out, you know."

She wants to remain free, to go anywhere at any time. Shimako-san had said that. She must have had that determination so that she could leave school if her family situation was ever discovered. It was unlikely that someone who had thought about it that much was going to reveal their secret lightly.

After all, Shimako-san loved this school. She would want to stay here.

"So we have to find something that Shimako would be willing to sacrifice herself to save."

"And that's not easy to find."

Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama sighed. Just a bit more, just a bit more, and Shimako-san's walls would come tumbling down. That's probably why they'd decided to include Yumi and Yoshino-san in their discussions. Since they were in the same grade, perhaps they had an idea.

"We're just missing that one pawn."

No sooner had Rei-sama said this, then:

"If you're after a pawn, then one exists."

A fifth voice echoed around the Rose Mansion.

"T-Touko-chan!"

Four simultaneous surprised cries.

There had been no sound from the staircase. Despite that, the girl with the ringlets was standing in front of the door, or, actually, a foot inside.

"H-h-h-h"

This time it was Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama that were left sounding like a jackhammer.

"How did you get there?"

"How? Through the front door, up the steps."

"Without making a single sound?"

"Oh – really? Wasn't it because you were all caught up in your conversation? Ah, but Touko is an actress, so she can walk silently too."

Touko-chan strode into the room without asking permission. Even Sachiko-sama was confused as she inquired about Touko-chan's earlier inexcusably rude opening line.

"Um, Touko-chan? Did you say something about a pawn?"

"Yes. There's a pawn in reserve."

"It's not you, right?"

Yoshino-san glanced sideways at Touko-chan.

"Unfortunately not. But they should be just as good."

Hearing her speaking so pompously, Rei-sama urged her on.

"So, what is it?"

"Nijou Noriko-san."

"Nijou Noriko? Who's that?"

"Touko's friend. She entered into Lillian's this year. She gave the address at the entrance ceremony."

Touko-chan puffed her chest out with pride. As though she was the one that gave the address at the entrance ceremony. Or their relationship was that close.

"Ah -. That could have been her name. At the time, I was thinking, "Who's that?""

Rei-sama ran her fingers through her short hair.

"She doesn't stand out all that much."

Whereas you stand out far too much. Everyone thought that, but no-one said anything.

"So, she has good grades? And?"

Sachiko-sama said, asking how they could use this Nijou Noriko as a pawn.

"Well."

Touko-chan's eyes suddenly glistened with moisture.

"Rosa Gigantea calls Noriko-san by just her name, with no honorific. And Noriko-san calls Rosa Gigantea "Shimako-san," as though they're friends."

The moisture turned into teardrops.

"I asked her, and they're not related or anything like that."

Her tears were obviously an act, like she was in an elementary school play. If Touko-chan wanted to be a real actress, she'd have to do better than this hackneyed acting. At any rate, this was undoubtedly her territory.

It must have shocked her find out that Shimako-san was close to this Nijou Noriko. So Touko-chan had been aiming to become Shimako-san's petit soeur after all.

But setting that topic aside for now.

"Shimako has a special first-year – "

"If that's true, then Touko-chan has indeed done us a great service."

The two Roses took the bait completely.

"I wonder if she's planning on taking her as her petit soeur."

"Who can say. I thought Shimako would have been a late bloomer."

"But she's already addressing her so familiarly."

They whispered their suspicions to each other, then in a loud voice agreed. The conversation had accelerated somewhat while Yumi was in a state of confusion.

"At any rate, we should be able to use Nijou Noriko. In that case, why don't we aim for the first-years' welcoming ceremony?"



"H-hold on a minute, please. You're planning on publicly humiliating Shimako-san in front of all the first-years!?"

Now that the discussion was turning to specifics, Yumi hastily called a stop to it.

"I said that before, right? It has to be in front of a large audience. Besides, the first-year welcoming ceremony is organized by the Yamayurikai, so the teachers and sisters stay out of it. It'll be easier for us to proceed under those circumstances. It would be absurd to try at the start or end of semester assemblies, parents' day would be completely impossible, and the school festival is too far in the future to even consider."

"But."

Would it be okay? Sachiko-sama smiled, seeing the question bubbling on Yumi's face.

"Don't worry. I've come up with a scenario that will make it all work out. Ah, that's right."

Then she turned to face everyone and said:

"You can't say a word about this to anyone, not just Shimako. We have to keep this a secret."

"Yes, of course!"

It was Touko-chan that answered so enthusiastically.

Yumi had mixed feelings about this, wondering why they had to bring Touko-chan into their group.

Intriguing First-Year

Part 1.

At first glance, the first-year Nijou Noriko was an ordinary young lady.

She had a bob haircut, although it was a bit long. Her straight black hair reached down to around her shoulders. Her bangs reached her eyebrows, forming a single line. Basically, it was an old-fashioned hairstyle that made her look like a traditional Japanese doll.

(What's so special about this girl ... ?)

8:10am. Yumi was observing Shimako-san's first-year friend from a spot in the hallway where she could see into the first-year camellia group classroom. Actually, she'd shadowed her here from the main gate. Or, more accurately, she already knew what Nijou Noriko looked like because she serendipitously happened to see her yesterday after school, so when she spotted her getting off the bus this morning she'd followed her here.

Incidentally, about yesterday's serendipity.

Of all things, Yumi had witnessed Touko-chan hiding Nijou Noriko's shoes. At any rate, she couldn't tell if Touko-chan was being daring or mischievous. She could have chosen a less obvious hiding place, but she simply dropped the shoes at the main entrance, a couple of metres away from the changing area, and went home.

Still, she couldn't approve of harassment, no matter how light. Yumi was about to quietly return the shoes when a first-year student walked past her. Yumi realized this was Nijou Noriko when she opened her shoe locker, stopped to think for a short while, then continued on her way home still wearing her indoor shoes. The young girl seemed as undisturbed as she was new to Lillian's.

Presently, she was sitting at her desk reading a paperback. After observing her like this for a couple of minutes, Yumi still couldn't detect any remarkable traits.

(What do she and Shimako-san have in common – ?)

Yumi had expected her to be a devout Christian, but this morning she'd walked straight past the statue of Maria-sama at the fork in the road without stopping to pray. Even if it was an honest mistake, it seemed unlikely that a true believer would forget to greet Maria-sama.

"... Like, does her family also run a temple?"

"No. Her father's a public servant and her mother's a teacher. Although, her family lives a fair way away, so she's currently living with a relative."

"Ah, I see."

As she was agreeing with the voice coming from behind, Yumi suddenly realized. She hadn't come here with anyone.

(Who is it!?)

Hastily turning around, Yumi recognized the girl with ringlets that was standing there and smiling.

"Yumi-sama."

"Ah, yes!?"

Yumi was a second-year and Touko-chan a first-year. Naturally, the honorific "-sama" had been used to address the older student, Yumi, but looking at it objectively their roles were reversed. Yumi was timid, like a child that had been caught doing something naughty, while Touko-chan was calm, like an adult admonishing her.

"Playing the detective?"

"No, not really."

Although it was probably pointless denying it at this point. A second-year student peering into the first-year camellia group classroom was bound to look suspicious, no matter how you look at it.

"If you're concerned about her, you should just ask Touko."

Touko-chan took Yumi by the hand and walked over to the classroom door. She could get a better look at Nijou Noriko from closer in, and by being with Touko-chan it wouldn't seem unnatural. From a distance, it would look like a conversation between a close junior and senior.

Yumi cleared her throat quietly and changed the topic of conversation.

"Um ... did you just arrive at school, Touko-chan?"

Touko-chan was holding her school bag which smelled of brand-new leather.

"No, I arrived before 8, but I've stayed away from the classroom to establish an alibi."

"An alibi ... !?"

"See, someone who arrived after her wouldn't have had a chance to tamper with her indoor shoes, right?"

She smiled suggestively.

(What's she done this time, the little ...)

Having just witnessed what happened yesterday, Yumi didn't want to hear about this.

"Don't be so concerned. It wasn't anything major."

"... Ah, r-right."

That's not so good, is it Fukuzawa Yumi? This person you've only just met is already able to read your mind.

"Noriko-san seems a bit standoffish, don't you think? She's always like that."

Touko-chan glanced inside the classroom.

She never lifted her gaze from the paperback when her classmates walked past her. She'd respond when asked something directly, but once the task was done she immersed herself in reading once more. Indeed, she didn't seem like the type who needed her friends to go with her to the toilet.

"But she shows a different side of her during lunchtime and after school."

"A different side?"

Yumi's gaze shifted from Nijou Noriko to Touko-chan. A different side. That was an intriguing statement.

"Do you want to see it?"

"I do!"

"Shh."

Touko-chan drew her index finger up to her lips and glared at Yumi. She hadn't meant to raise her voice that loudly, but Nijou Noriko suddenly raised her head so the pair hurriedly hid behind the door.

"Alright then, today at lunch. Wait for me near the main entrance."

Touko-chan said, at extremely low volume.

"Huh? Lunchtime's not that good for me."

Yumi hesitated for a moment. She was supposed to have lunch at the Rose Mansion today. Not for a meeting about the first-years' welcoming ceremony, but for a private discussion about how to go about getting Shimako-san to reveal her secret.

"It's fine if you don't want to see."

Faced with the two options, she made a bold choice. Seeing the other side of Nijou Noriko would surely come in useful in the future.

"Well, until then."

Grin. Touko-chan smiled, seemingly buoyed by her success. Yumi didn't know what Touko-chan was going to show her, but she started to feel a bit uneasy, wondering if it really would measure up against lunch with Sachiko-sama, as well as the important private discussion.

"Ah, please come alone too."

Touko-chan said, stopping to turn around after entering the classroom as though she just remembered.

"Why?"

"If we're not quiet, the wild duck will fly away. And even at the best of times, your lack of composure makes you stand out."

Yumi thought that last remark was uncalled for, but said nothing. Without Touko-chan's guidance, she wouldn't be able to see the wild duck Nijou Noriko in her natural habitat. Besides, she couldn't come up with anything to refute the "lack of composure" claim.

Part 2.

"And Yoshino-sama?"

Touko-chan asked as soon as they met at the main entrance, checking out the area around Yumi.

"It seems she's not here."

"Well, you told me to come alone, right?"

"Even so, she might have come along too. Yoshino-sama seems quite stubborn. But you seem to have shaken her off."

She said, placing an index finger on her cheek. She was either observant, or good at deduction.

Indeed, it had been quite a bit of trouble to leave Yoshino-san and come here alone, when Yoshino-san had been expecting they'd go to the Rose Mansion together. If she had said, "I'll be going ahead," then she would have been peppered with questions like, "Why?" or "Where are you going?" In the end, Yumi fled out of the classroom and dashed off in the opposite direction. Intentionally taking the long way around to throw off any pursuit.

She was still a little short of breath when Touko-chan arrived at their arranged meeting place, looking completely at leisure.

"Well then, shall we go?"

Touko-chan checked her watch, then started walking.

"Go? Where to?"

"To where Noriko-san is. That's what you were told, right?"

Yumi already knew that much. What she was asking was where that was.

"Ah, you'll be fine in your indoor shoes. You'll just have to wipe them on the mat when we come back to the school building."

Touko-chan said as she quickly walked out the main entrance. It seemed unbelievable that she was a new student. She had a presence as though she owned the high-school building.

The light-pink cherry blossoms had completely disappeared, replaced with yellow-green shoots as they walked half a pace apart through the cherry

trees. The lunchtime rush of students heading to Milk Hall or the canteen had passed, so they only saw a couple of other students scattered here and there.

When they reached the front of the auditorium, Touko-chan stopped and said:

"No loud noises from this point on."

After issuing this warning, Touko-chan didn't wait for Yumi's response before proceeding around the auditorium to the back.

"This – "

Yumi knew this place well. A lone cherry tree blossomed amidst the ginkgo trees. She'd eaten lunch here often during autumn of the previous year, to escape the gaze of the newspaper club.

The back of the auditorium. – Shimako-san's favorite place.

"Noriko-san's here."

Walking in front, Touko-chan suddenly stopped and Yumi gently bumped into her.

"... Ow."

Yumi whispered, "Sorry," to Touko-chan, who was glaring resentfully at her, then looked over her shoulder.

"Ah."

Nijou Noriko was there, but she wasn't alone – Shimako-san was with her.

"What do you think? Yumi-sama."

"Ah, well ... "

She wasn't close enough to hear what they were talking about, but Nijou Noriko did indeed look like a different person compared to the girl in the classroom.

Similarly, and this was even more surprising to Yumi, Shimako-san had an expression on her face that Yumi had never seen before.

It was like she was completely relaxed. Or that she had complete peace of mind. At any rate, it was a lovely expression, calm and peaceful.

(Why?)

Was it because Nijou Noriko was there? Was she that important a person? Were we no good?

These questions burst into Yumi's mind one after the other.

Even though Shimako-san had said she wasn't even thinking about a petit soeur - .

"Ah, Yumi-sama, where are you going?"

When she came to her senses, Yumi's feet had already done an about turn, all the strength had drained from her body and she was staggering along uncertainly.

"Thank-you. I'm leaving now."

She didn't want to see any more.

Shimako-san's relaxed expression and the first-year by her side talking animatedly. At this moment, it was probably impossible for anyone else to enter into their world. As her friend, she should be delighted that Shimako-san was happy. She thought that her inability to do so showed how small her heart was. Her emotions were in turmoil and she couldn't control them.

"I see. I'll stay and observe for a bit longer."

"Okay then, bye."

As she kept walking, Touko-chan's muttering reached Yumi's ears.

"You're more delicate than you appear, Yumi-sama."

"Huh?"

When she instinctively turned around, Touko-chan laughed.

"Rosa Gigantea's so far away. That's why you're so solemn, right?"

"That's n-"

Yumi swallowed her words and left the auditorium.

Setting aside whether she was right or not.

A know-it-all junior was a bit unpleasant. That's what Yumi thought.

Part 3.

"I see."

Sachiko-sama sighed deeply.

"And after that you didn't feel up to coming to the Rose Mansion, and stayed in your classroom the entire time."

"Yeah."

Despite telling Yoshino-san that she'd be late, in the end she didn't make it to the Rose Mansion at all during lunch. She thought her explanation would have seemed a little weak, and there was no visible reason, so all she could do was speak her true feelings. Thinking hard, Yumi spun her words.

It was now after school. Only Sachiko-sama and Yumi were in the Rose Mansion.

"It's not that I don't understand."

Sachiko-sama treated her despondent petit soeur to a warm cup of black tea.

"What does it mean to be friends? When I seriously think about this sort of thing, I want some distance from my friends."

"... I'm sorry."

"It's fine. I'm not concerned, because you came and told me about it. Even Yoshino-chan won't be angry now. ... So what's next? Why don't you stay for a while and calm down before you see her?"

"Okay."

She still hadn't made a full recovery. Still, she agreed.

Sachiko-sama was kind. Yumi only ever wanted to answer her cheerfully, so she tentatively agreed.

Sachiko-sama was usually scary, and while she may not have fully understood Yumi, whenever Yumi found herself bewildered and unable to cope with something, just being at Sachiko-sama's side was enough to warm her heart. Her onee-sama was someone precious to her.



"Silly Yumi. Moved to tears?"

"Because."

Now that she was aware of the tears, she wanted to cry even more.

"Go ahead."

Sachiko-sama embraced Yumi around the shoulders, gently pulling her closer.

Yumi thought of Shimako-san the entire time she was pressed against her onee-sama's chest.

Shimako-san no longer had an onee-sama to show her this sort of kindness. She had no-one to silently quell the tears that fell for reasons she didn't understand.

How lonely would she be? How anxious would she be?

It may be a loneliness that even friends couldn't fill.

If Shimako-san wanted someone to warm her heart, then who could blame her for that?

Even if it meant that Nijou Noriko became Shimako-san's savior.

"Onee-sama, I – "

Just when the mood was so nice.

Thud!

"Sachiko onee-sama, big news!"

The third-wheel appeared, almost as though she knew she was entering into a good scene. Naturally, it was without any advance warning.

"What's the matter, Touko-chan?"

Sachiko-sama asked, immediately separating her body from Yumi's. Because it was such a rapid assault, she couldn't process it all immediately, so didn't have the presence of mind to issue a caution about "Sachiko onee-sama." See, because Touko-chan could climb the Rose Mansion staircase without making a sound.

"At lunchtime, Shimako-sama and Noriko-san had a secret meeting."

Touko-chan forgot to close the door as she rushed over to Sachiko-sama.

"So I've heard."

"You've heard ... ? Who from?"

As she spoke, Touko-chan slowly shifted her gaze to Sachiko-sama's neighbor.

"Ah, Yumi-sama. It was you?"

Like she'd just noticed. While she was still pulling herself together, Yumi forced a smile and said, "Gokigenyou. Thanks for earlier." Touko-chan showed she was still a new student by her response of, "Now's not the time for a cheerful greeting."

"I know that Shimako and this first-year Noriko met behind the auditorium. But they were just having lunch together."

Sachiko-sama pulled out a chair and sat down.

"That's all that Yumi-sama saw."

Touko-chan shrugged. Yumi frowned, thinking, "Oh, so this big news happened after I left then."

"Shimako-sama gave something to Noriko-san."

"What was it?"

"It was a cloth pouch. I couldn't tell what was inside, so I gathered my courage and when Noriko-san was out of the classroom on cleaning duty, I opened her bag and looked inside."

"Touko-chan, that was going a bit – "

Too far, Yumi tried to caution her from the sidelines.

"She's my friend."

Touko-chan cut her off, decisively. A mind that never doubted the correctness of its actions could easily suppress any feelings of guilt.

Sachiko-sama let out a gasp of amazement, but getting into an argument about this wouldn't advance the main topic, so she pressed onwards.

"And? What was inside?"

"A juzu. Sachiko onee-sama."

"A juzu!?"

"Yes, a juzu. Um, that string of beads they use at Buddhist ceremonies, like funerals."

The string of beads they used at Buddhist funeral ceremonies. The string of beads her rural grandmother used every morning when she prayed before her household shrine. Touko-chan held her hands together in front of her chest, in a praying pose.

"Shimako brought a juzu to school ... "

Sachiko-sama put her elbows on the table, linking her fingers in front of her mouth.

"We should use it as a prop, don't you think?"

Touko-chan looked triumphant, having found the pawn, Nijou Noriko, and the juzu prop.

"Yes ... well, we'll see."

"And, during class, I was working on a side-project."

Touko-chan took a notebook from her bag and handed it over to Sachiko-sama, who had a conflicted expression on her face.

""Great Detective Touko's Casebook. The Mystery of the Missing Juzu?" What is this?"

"I'm not just an actor, I'm also interested in writing and producing. So this ... "

Tee hee. She shrugged, laying on the cute act so thick she was practically shouting it.

"I thought I'd try writing the script."

"Huh!?"

Rosa Chinensis and her petit soeur both exclaimed simultaneously.

She thought she'd try writing the script. That was indeed what Touko-chan had said.

Even so, "Great Detective Touko." Pretty conceited of her to make herself the lead.

"Um, Touko-chan ... ?"

Hello?

"Have no fear. Each of the Rose onee-samas have their moment in the spotlight."

"Um."

"Of course, the auditorium scene is the climax."

"..."

It was useless. Touko's mind was already completely occupied with her own play.

"What are you prattling on about?"

A hand came from behind and took hold of the notebook / script. It was Rei-sama standing there.

"Touko-chan, are you there? There's something that has to be said clearly, so I'll say it. You're not a member of this group. Thank-you for your information. But the way you're trying to seize control is laughable."

Ah, Rei-sama. Hypothetically speaking, she'd cut right to the chase, saying what Yumi wanted to say but couldn't. Rosa Foetida was as reliable as ever.

"But."

"But nothing."

Even as she was issuing this stinging rebuke, Rei-sama was smiling and flipping through the notebook.

"Alright, alright. I've picked out most of the important points from your scenario, Touko-chan. Now step back and be quiet. Okay?"

She rolled the notebook into a cylinder and gently tapped Touko-chan on the head with it.

"Okay."

Touko-chan answered, in good-little-girl mode.

"Shimako-san will be here soon."

Yoshino-san entered the room, a bit behind Rei-sama. They'd arranged a meeting for this time. Not just for the people in on the secret.

"Bye then. Touko's off to her club activities."

Touko-chan skipped past Yoshino-san on her way out. Her ringlets bouncing jauntily as she did so.

"... Incredible."

Without thinking, Yumi groaned.

"What?"

Rei-sama asked, eyebrow raised, guessing that Yumi was talking about her.

"Touko-chan's behavior."

"Oh right. Well, I say that, but I'm used to it."

Rei-sama nonchalantly angled her chin towards Yoshino-san.

Oh right.

"I see."

The way Touko-chan carried on. It could definitely give Yoshino-san a run for her money.

Part 4.

Shimako-san walked into the room carrying the musical score for "Ave Maria" on the piano.

"I've been given permission to use the church organ."

She certainly didn't seem to think she was on a fool's errand. Yumi's chest burned.

(She's my friend!)

She recited Touko-chan's words in her mind like a spell, to keep a lid on those unbearable thoughts. There was no way to know what was right without seeing the results. So they all believed their only option was to see this through to the end.

Now then.

Shimako-san would be playing the organ at this year's first-year welcoming ceremony. That's what they'd decided.

There was no way they could tell Shimako-san about the play they were going to use to entrap her, so this was their decoy. And a plan that created work for Shimako-san was convenient in many ways. Since they could hold their secret meetings when Shimako-san wasn't there.

"How was it? The organ."

Rei-sama nonchalantly probed Shimako-san.

"Let me think. Like Sachiko-sama said, the keys have a different weight to a piano, so there's some parts that are tricky to play."

Then Shimako-san smiled and finished her answer by saying, "But once I'm used to it, I'll manage somehow." She really didn't seem to have noticed anything.

"If you're not confident we can always switch. Back to that other – "

Sachiko-sama twirled her index finger around in a small circle.

"No please!!"

The two boutons screamed out almost simultaneously.

"I think I'll be sick that day if we change back."

"Yeah, I'm burning up with enthusiasm. Wait, that's not enthusiasm, that's a fever coming on."

"... So it looks like we all agree it would be better if I played the organ."

Shimako-san smiled wryly, raising her arm gently.

"Really? I thought it was well received."

"Oh it was. The Bouton's Great Talent Show."

Traditional Japanese dancing to "Maria-sama's Soul."

A magic act backed by "El Bimbo" on pianica.

The ara essa ssa of the Loach Scopping dance.

No-one had ever heard of the older students doing something like that at the new students' welcoming ceremony.

"You've done it before."

"That was ... "

They'd been willing to sacrifice life and limb to properly farewell the graduating Roses. Plus, because it was in the family, so to speak, they could cut loose a bit. It wasn't something they could do in front of a large audience, especially not of first-years.

"You're no fun."

Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama were amusing themselves by fanning the flames, but if their petit soeurs really did put on such a show then it would obviously be incredibly embarrassing for them as grande soeurs too.

"At any rate, that idea's rejected. Rejected."

In solidarity with Yoshino-san, she rejected the idea. Even if it was a joke, even if it was to trick Shimako-san into going along with their dummy plan, that dreadful suggestion had to be killed off as quickly as possible. Adding her hand to their two fists, Shimako-san seemed to like the idea of playing the organ better than performing a traditional Japanese dance too.

"Shimako."

Sachiko-sama suddenly spoke with a serious expression.

"Yes."

"Give it your best."

"Huh? ... Okay."

Shimako-san seemed a bit confused, perhaps sensing the strange atmosphere.

The Maria Ceremony was only three days away.

Behind the Scenes of the Maria Ceremony Inquisition

Part 1.

Yumi was already nervous.

The four instigators, plus Touko-chan, had gathered before 7:30 in the Rose Mansion for a final meeting, which had just ended. Since they had to arrive at school before the two leading actresses in order to set out their net.

"Yoshino, you're in charge of escorting Shimako to the chapel when she arrives."

"Roger."

"Yumi-chan, you're to wait by the first-year shoe lockers and let us know as soon as Nijou Noriko arrives at school."

"Okay."

Rei-sama briskly confirmed their assigned roles.

"Now, Touko-chan."

"Ye~s. I've got to get the juzu."

She was in high spirits. Even her ringlets seemed to have gained extra bounce somehow.

"I wonder if Nijou Noriko will have brought the juzu today."

Not a morning person, Sachiko-sama spoke lethargically.

Indeed. The juzu. That was the main point. Without it, they couldn't proceed with Rei-sama's rewrite of the script, "The Maria Ceremony Inquisition."

"Ah, but, it's always been kept hidden in her bag, even up to yesterday. She was probably planning on waiting until Rosa Gigantea had some free time after the Maria Ceremony to return it to her."

"Huh?!"

What did you just say Touko-chan? That you've been peeking inside your classmate's bag every day?

(They're friends, friends.)

Yumi shook her head, and recited this in her mind.

"Well then, let's pray for success."

Everyone nodded at Rei-sama's words, then scattered to their assigned locations. There wasn't another meeting organized. The next time the five were all assembled would probably be during the event itself.

Yumi hurried to the shoe locker room.

On the way, her eye was suddenly caught by the statue of Maria-sama at the end of the corridor. Unlike every other day, Maria-sama was adorned with a floral necklace. Today was the Maria Festival.

When she was young, today of all days she'd try to be a good girl, and not fight with her friends. But this year, she found it a bit difficult to look Maria-sama straight in the eye.

Yumi hoped that once it was all over, she'd be able to properly confess to Maria-sama.

She was looking forwards to being able to proudly proclaim, "That's my friend."

(– But if things go south, that won't happen!)

She spotted Shimako-san ahead of her down the corridor, much earlier than they'd expected her to arrive at school.

"Oh no."

Yumi immediately hid behind a pillar. If they met here, their plan would go awry right at the start. According to the script, Yoshino-san was supposed to get Shimako-san to assist her because Yumi was late to arrive.

(W-what should I do ...)

She had to get to the shoe boxes so she could watch for Nijou Noriko. But Shimako-san was in her way. There weren't that many people that had arrived at school just yet that she could try and fool Shimako-san into thinking she was just another face in the crowd either.

(Well, in that case I've got no choice.)

Yumi turned back, climbed the stairs, then walked towards the main entrance before descending the next set of stairs, taking the long way around.

"Fukuzawa-san, quiet in the hallway."

Thanks to the teacher's warning, she hadn't managed to escape unscathed. Looking at her watch, it was 7:45. Nijou Noriko generally arrived a bit after 8, but that was just an average, so there was some variation either earlier or later. Especially for students who caught the bus from the train station, traffic problems that caused a 10 to 15 minute delay were a common occurrence.

Descending the stairs, as she was turning towards the shoe-boxes, Yumi caught a glimpse of Shimako-san from behind, in roughly the same spot Yumi had been before her detour, and looking none the wiser.

(Sorry.)

Instinctively she clasped her hands together.

"... What are you doing, Yumi-san?"

"Oowah."

Her heart jumped.

"Ma-mami-san."

"Gokigenyou. Did something happen to Shimako-san?"

"No, not at all."

"Really?"

"Yeah ... "

"Well, okay. But it's definitely smelled like something's been going on these last few days. It seems interesting, but I haven't dug too deeply, instead waiting to see how it turns out. Especially since you've reserved me a front-row seat."

"Ahahaha."

So that's how it was.

It would be pointless trying to deceive her. Mami-san was playing the role of Shimako-san's assistant today. When it happened, she'd know the inside story.

"Um, Mami-san."

"I know, I know, keep it a secret from Shimako-san. But in return, when it's over, I want the full story. An interview with Rosa Chinensis or Rosa Foetida to accompany the article in the "Lillian Kawaraban."'"

"I can't promise anything, but I'll have a word with my onee-sama."

"Okay. I'll keep quiet for today."

The way she airily walked away showed she was looking forward to it. But Yumi, still startled by these events, didn't have time to enjoy herself.

"Gokigenyou, Yumi-sama."

"Gokigenyou, Rosa Chinensis en bouton."

It looked as though there were always first-years who knew all about the Yamayurikai members even though they'd only just entered high-school, as Yumi was greeted by a succession of students she didn't know while she waited near the first-year shoe boxes. Although the polite juniors were actually quite cute.

"May I inquire as to who you're waiting for?"

The end result was that one of them approached her.

(This isn't good.)

She was totally standing out. Even though Yumi had been chosen for this task on the basis that Nijou Noriko would walk by without noticing her. What had she done to attract this much attention?

(Maybe I should move.)

Since she didn't have to worry about being spotted by Shimako-san, Yumi decided to move from the shoe-box room to the hallway adjoining the room. But even then, her situation wasn't all that much changed, so Yumi moved further back to the point where she could just make out the entrance and resumed her stakeout.

(Black, longish bob cut ...)

As 8 o'clock approached, Yumi grew steadily more nervous. The face that she'd been intently searching for had not yet appeared. Yumi wouldn't have mistaken her in a line-up of students, but it was possible that she could have slipped past unnoticed in the crowd.

(Maybe I should have waited by her shoe box, even if I did stand out.)

Just as Yumi was starting to head back, a girl walked past her.

(Huh ... !?)

She seemed to sparkle for a moment, as though someone were saying, "It's her." Yumi rubbed her eyes and looked again, but there was no fluorescent paint or gold thread, just a girl in a normal school uniform walking away from her. But there was no doubt that it was Nijou Noriko.

(Ah, ah.)

With her legs in a tangle, Yumi frantically chased after her. The plan was that Yumi would report to Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama, who were waiting in a different corridor, after confirming that Nijou Noriko had entered into the first-year camellia classroom.

Unaware that she was being followed by an older student, Nijou Noriko walked calmly along the corridor. She had no idea what was going to happen to her today. – On that point, Yumi could sympathize.

(Hm?)

She suddenly stopped in the middle of an empty hallway.

(What is it?)

Thinking she'd been spotted, Yumi immediately looked for a place to hide, but unfortunately there was nothing large enough for her to hide behind.

(Outside?)

Nijou Noriko was looking out through an open window.

Indeed, the weather was fine today. Just like Maria-sama's soul.

(Even so, what's with that expression?)

Even from a distance, her face looked gentle and kind. Or, to put it another way, she looked happy.

After Nijou Noriko had departed carrying her bag, Yumi went over and looked out the window from where she'd been standing.

"_"

She knew she'd lost.

No, it had never been about winning or losing. But it was the final realization that she should entrust Shimako-san to this first-year, Nijou Noriko.

Framed by the rectangular window, she could just make out the figures of Shimako-san and Yoshino-san carrying cardboard boxes full of medallions.

Part 2.

Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama walked side-by-side.

Ahead of them was the first-year camellia class. The classroom that Nijou Noriko was in.

Yumi followed along a couple of steps behind them, unsure of her place.

Would it really all be resolved peacefully after starting with an attack like this?

Perhaps being given this chance to come clean would be a nuisance to Shimako-san. Perhaps she'd prefer to have an uneventful time at school, nestled close with Nijou Noriko as her petit soeur.

"What are you mumbling about, Yumi?"

"Um, nothing."

"Yu~mi-chan. I don't want to hear it if it's something we can't do anything about at this point."

"Ah, right."

There was no point saying it if they weren't going to listen.

Sachiko-sama told her to stand back a bit, so reluctantly Yumi stood next to the wall about 5 metres away. Looking idly out the window, Yumi played the role of "person waiting for someone." She probably wasn't putting enough effort into her acting for it to look strained, or like she was hamming it up. Instead, she'd taken on the role completely.

"Would you mind calling Nijou Noriko-san over?"

Sachiko-sama said to a student in the vicinity of the classroom's front door.

"Alright."

The student seemed completely shocked by the sudden appearance of the two Roses, but quickly straightened up and responded.

"Please wait here a moment."

Handling it splendidly.

At the same time their messenger disappeared into the classroom, Touko-chan quietly left her stand-by position in the hallway and entered through the rear door.

(Oooh, it's started ...)

There was no turning back now. All she could do was give it her best and not worry about the outcome.

Nijou Noriko emerged from the classroom. She seemed slightly confused when she saw Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama, as though they weren't the people she expected to have called for her.

"Gokigenyou. Are you Nijou Noriko-san?"

Rei-sama broke the ice.

"Yes ... ?"

Nijou Noriko responded carefully, as though trying to sound out her opponent's state of mind.

"Hmm."

Sachiko-sama looked her up and down.

"So this ... ?"

The conversation was hard to follow from Yumi's vantage point, five metres away. Although, if it followed the script, she should know what they were saying even if the volume was a bit low. But if they were ad-libbing, they were doing very well. If the world came with a remote control, Yumi would be pressing the volume-up button.

(Ah!)

Rei-sama had just done an audacious ad-lib. She'd grabbed Nijou Noriko's chin, angling her face left and right, up and down.

"What are you doing!"

Her voice was so loud that it reached Yumi. Nijou Noriko brushed away Rei-sama's hand, glaring at the older student. Quite the strong appearance.

From her position, Yumi could only see the backs of Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama. But she didn't have to see their expression to know they were pleased with what they'd seen of Nijou Noriko. They probably wouldn't have

accepted someone who sobbed weakly after being assaulted as a candidate for Shimako-san's petit soeur.

According to Rei-sama's script, the two Roses would ask Nijou Noriko a couple of rambling questions before letting her go. Since the main reasons they came here were so they could remember her face, and so that Touko-chan had time to get the juzu.

But Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama were getting caught up in their acting. They were provoking her, as though they wanted to start a fight. Yumi was getting worried that they were going a bit too far.

"Wait a minute."

See, told you so. Enraged, Noriko called out to them as they were walking away. Demanding an explanation for the shabby treatment she'd received. Rei-sama returned alone to her earlier position and answered:

"So you want to know why we came to see you? It's because we wanted to see your face."

"You came to see my face?"

Crushed right at the outset, Nijou Noriko seemed to crumple, and Rei-sama asked her a question of her own.

"Do you like Toudou Shimako?"

That question was the only one that reached Yumi clearly.

"I do."

(Alright!)

Alone in a corner of the hallway, Yumi raised her fist. Even as she was jokingly wondering why she was posing victoriously, she could see a glorious future ahead.

"Okay. Good luck to you."

Having been told that, Nijou Noriko looked confused as she went back into her classroom. Touko-chan passed her on the way, and when she spotted Yumi she patted her skirt pocket and flashed the peace sign.

The juzu of fate was thus delivered into the hands of the Yamayurikai executive.

Part 3.

The ceremony took place with no teachers or nuns present.

The high-school division of Lillian's respected the independence of its students, so the student council generally operated without adult supervision.

(Oooh, this takes me back.)

Yumi peeked in through the doorway, her excitement building.

It was the afternoon following the priest's morning mass. There were approximately 200 first-years assembled in the chapel, already seated in their six class blocks. Exactly one year earlier, Yumi had got her first glimpse of her onee-sama when she was playing the organ, and was immediately drawn to her. Although at that time, she'd never imagined that one year later she would be Rosa Chinensis en bouton.

"Why are you sneaking around?"

Yumi turned around when prodded, and standing there was Sachiko-sama, having made the leap across the year-long gap. On her chest was a dazzling, deep crimson, rose corsage. Unfortunately, it was not the flower Rosa Chinensis, nor was the white one Rosa Gigantea, or the yellow one Rosa Foetida. Although no matter the flower, it could only look better when Sachiko-sama was wearing it.

"Your rose is crooked."

Sachiko-sama adjusted the salmon pink corsage attached to Yumi's breast pocket as she gently chided her petit soeur. It didn't seem much changed from before, but it was probably subtly different to her onee-sama. Or maybe it was just that she had to be doing something to calm her nerves.

"Yumi."

"Yes?"

"... No, never mind."

Sachiko-sama had started to say something but then stopped. Her hands seemed to be shaking slightly. Perversely, Yumi felt relieved when she

saw her onee-sama anxious or hesitant. Seeing that side of her peek out from time to time made her all the more human, which made Yumi happy.

"You look really pretty, onee-sama."

"Huh?"

Yumi gently wrapped those shaking hands with her own.

"Let me get a proper look at you."

"... Alright."

Just as Sachiko-sama was giving her permission to look, the sound of a shutter clicking echoed around them.

"Tsutako-san."

"Personally, I'm more interested in you Red Rose soeurs."

Tsutako-san peeked in through the door and said, "There."

"More interested? Than what?"

"Mami-san's orders. She said it was vital that I got shots of Shimako-san and Nijou Noriko. And that she wanted to use the good ones in the "Lillian Kawaraban.""

"... That Mami-san."

Yumi looked over at Mami-san, standing some distance away with a salmon pink corsage attached to her chest. Even so, her deductions had led her quite close to the truth.

"Well, it's fine. She'll keep quiet during the welcoming ceremony, like she promised."

Mami-san waved gently, smiling. Formidable. Really, if she turned into an enemy, she would be a scary opponent indeed.

"Sorry I'm late."

Just before their scheduled start time, Shimako-san and Yoshino-san arrived in the chapel. The piano score for "Ave Maria" had gone missing somewhere inside the Rose Mansion, and they'd spent the lunch break looking for it.

Of course that was because Yoshino-san had intentionally hidden it, and then found it at an opportune time, in accordance with their scenario. Why

did she do that? Because their plans would go awry if Nijou Noriko and Shimako-san met during lunch and discussed the juzu.

"Shimako-san was talking about playing it from memory, without the score. I had a heck of a time trying to stop her ... it was a bit nerve wracking."

Yoshino-san whispered, as she glanced sideways at the white rose pinned to Shimako-san's chest.

Even though they were only just at the start, or not even there yet, the scenario was starting to unravel at the seams due to various ad-libs and accidents.

Although, reality never goes exactly to plan.

Would they really be able to pull this off neatly? The start time arrived as Yumi was worrying about this.

Part 4.

"To all first-year students, let me begin by congratulating you on entering high school."

With this greeting from Sachiko-sama, the welcoming ceremony began.

Since she was standing in the background, Yumi couldn't see Sachiko-sama's gallant face directly, but she was eminently satisfied by the awed reaction of the first-years.

Thinking, "This is how wonderful my onee-sama is."

It may just have been "petit soeur foolishness," but that was fine. She'd be a fool for her onee-sama. Since that was the correct stance for the petit soeur.

Yumi turned her attention to the first-year camellia class and quickly spotted Nijou Noriko. She was looking beyond Sachiko-sama, her gaze lingering in the area around Yumi. Her pleading gaze was startling, but naturally it wasn't Yumi she was looking for, but Rosa Gigantea who was standing beside her.

She must have wanted to inform Shimako-san about the missing juzu. But Shimako-san was probably thinking about the program of events and didn't notice Nijou Noriko's gaze. Even if she had noticed, there was nothing she could do about it at this point.

Yumi also spotted Touko-chan seated behind her classmate, Nijou Noriko. She was calm and composed, and grinned when her eyes met Yumi's.

"We'll start with the presentation of commemorative medallions."

Sachiko-sama ended with those words, handing the microphone to Rei-sama.

Hearing the keyword, "medallion," Yumi quickly returned to her senses. The event unique to the first-years welcoming ceremony was about to start. Then the plan was to have "that" happen in the middle of the presentation of medallions.

(So stressful, so stressful.)

She picked up the closest of the six cardboard boxes, the one labeled with the name "plum," from the table beside her. Yoshino picked up the "wisteria" box next to it, and Mami-san the "chrysanthemum" one, then they went and stood beside the Roses.

"Yumi-san, you were supposed to take the tag off the box."

Mami-san pointed this out to her.

"Ah, oh right."

Yumi put the tag back on the table then moved to Sachiko-sama's left-hand side. Oh boy. Even the ring-in assistant was more composed than her.

While all this was going on, the classes that Rei-sama had called out – plum, wisteria and chrysanthemum – lined up in the aisle that ran between the rows of pews.

"May the Virgin Mary bless you and watch over you."

Inside the boxes that the assistants held was the precise number of medallions required for each class, neatly lined up so that their chains didn't get tangled. The Roses took the medallions one at a time and placed them around the necks of the first-year students.

It didn't take long to empty the 30 or so medallions from the boxes.

"Would peach class, pine class and camellia class step forward now."

Rei-sama's voice came through the mic.

Camellia class. The time had finally arrived.

Yumi trembled with excitement as she picked up the box for peach class.

There wasn't really anything the boutons had to do for this scene. But she was nervous just watching. She couldn't help but think back to one year before when she'd been a part of first-year peach class and received a medallion from the former Rosa Chinensis. Like a tired person counting sheep but still remaining wide awake.

"Calm down."

Sachiko-sama said quietly. But her voice contained a touch of excitement.

About half the medallions were remaining in her box. All the classes were moving at about the same pace, so there would probably be about half the medallions remaining in the box that Mami-san was holding too.

Yumi snuck a glance to the side.

There were only three more girls to go until Nijou Noriko received her medallion.

"May the Virgin Mary bless you and watch over you."

Strangely, Yumi could hear Shimako-san's voice clearly.

Thump, thump.

Her heart beat like a TV drama sound-effect.

Just one more.

Sachiko-sama's hand stopped moving.

She saw Touko-chan take a step out of line.

Then, just as Nijou Noriko stepped in front of Shimako-san.

"Stop right there!"

A voice rang out with impeccable timing.

"That girl doesn't qualify to receive a medallion from Rosa Gigantea."

With her voice echoing around the chapel, Touko-chan took center stage. She was able to keep her breathing steady, perhaps a result of her training.

"Touko-san!"

Naturally, "that girl," Nijou Noriko called out her classmate's name in surprise.

"Esteemed Roses, please forgive me for interrupting this sacred ceremony."

Touko-chan glanced at Nijou Noriko, then turned to the three Roses and bowed quickly.

"What is the meaning of this. Umm ... Touko-san?"

Sachiko-sama was paying attention to her acting. Intentionally using the honorific "-san" when addressing Touko-chan.

"Please listen, Rosa Chinensis. Touko can't stay silent any longer."

Just what you'd expect from an actress, self-styled or not. Pleading for attention with cloudy eyes. As though she was the real victim.

"Just now, you said something about Noriko-san not meeting the qualifications to receive a medallion from Rosa Gigantea?"

"That's right, Rosa Foetida."

At that point, the color suddenly drained from Shimako-san's face. She'd finally realized what Touko-chan held in her left hand.

A few seconds later, Nijou Noriko's expression stiffened. With her expression still frozen, she grabbed for the juzu, but the moment she did Touko-chan lifted it high overhead.

"This is more fitting for you!"

With Touko-chan's excessively loud laughter as background music, the dazzling light coming through the stained glass windows caught the crystal juzu, making it shine brilliantly like a halo.

Part 5.

The sparkling juzu was really pretty.

Flecks of light scattered around the chapel, like a portent of some visitor from heaven.

"This is yours, right Noriko-san?"

"It's not mine."

Nijou Noriko flatly denied it. Probably expecting the actress Touko-chan to break into a soliloquy and not wanting to suffer through it.

Then she dutifully asked how Touko-chan came to believe that she was the owner of the juzu, and, with the end justifying the means, Touko-chan made something up.

Sachiko-sama stepped in when the situation escalated and they started growling at each other like a pair of dogs.

"What do you say, Noriko-san. Is this your property, like Touko-san claims?"

"I told you it wasn't."

Perhaps it was hard for her to reign it back in now that her spring had sprung, but of all things, Nijou Noriko was now snarling at Rosa Chinensis.

"You'd swear that in front of Maria-sama?"

"Of course."

Because the juzu was Shimako-san's. To a degree, they'd expected that answer from her.

"Well then, I can throw it away, right?"

"Huh!?"

Nijou Noriko had been puffed up with pride, but when she heard this she was thrown into confusion.

The juzu flew free from Touko-chan's hand, tracing an arc through the air. Rei-sama caught it.

"If it doesn't belong to you, then it's none of your concern, right?"

Intentionally trying to anger her, Rei-sama juggled the juzu, then spun it around her finger.

"So you're asking me to destroy the juzu to prove my faith? ... Alright, I confess. It's mine."

"Noriko!"

Shimako-san jumped in. The agitators mentally raised a fist in triumph – just another little push.

The climax was at hand. It would end with Shimako-san admitting that the juzu was hers and acknowledging her situation at home.

But the other first-years knew nothing of this, so they started murmuring when Rosa Gigantea stepped in.

(Now, Shimako-san!)

Getting impatient, Yumi wanted to give her her cue.

However.

"Shimako-san, don't say anything unnecessary."

The strangest thing happened, Nijou Noriko stopped Shimako-san. Then she said the cool line, "At the moment, I'm the one with the problem."

"Nice attitude."

Sachiko-sama smiled radiantly. Her stunning smile that could make anyone raise a white flag.

But Nijou Noriko didn't surrender. She babbled on for a while about hypotheticals, then held out her hand and said, "Give me back the juzu."

"Not yet."

Rei-sama smiled.

"If you want it back, tell us who it belongs to."

Even though she knew. A sustained assault. The interrogation was as terrifying as the two Roses were beautiful. Yumi thought this even though she knew the inside story. Nijou Noriko must surely be frightened. It wouldn't seem strange if she broke down in tears.

(Huh?)

Yumi heard a soft rustling sound, and looking over she saw Mami-san stealthily moving her hands behind her back. Yumi peeked at her backside, and saw she was jotting down some shorthand notes in her student diary.

(Incredible...!)

Huge respect for her reporter's spirit. And her special ability. It was like she had eyes in the back of her head.

"Answer the question, Nijou Noriko."

Hearing Sachiko-sama's voice, Yumi went back to watching the unfolding scene. The interrogation was still in progress.

"It's - "

Then she seemed to finally be lost for words. The situation had completely turned against Nijou Noriko.

"What's the matter, Nijou Noriko?"

Then Nijou Noriko looked down, as though to shut out all the noise that was pouring down upon her. What was she thinking? It looked as though she couldn't find the answer she wanted within her heart, but was still searching for it.

"Say something, Nijou Noriko."

"What happened to your earlier spirit?"

There was no let-up in their attacks.

Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama had been forged by the previous Roses, and they seemed to follow their lead as they reveled in the role of villain.

Watching in silence, Shimako-san smiled weakly. One moment she was standing behind Nijou Noriko, and then:

"That's quite enough!"

She shouted as she stepped forwards. The only other time Yumi had heard Shimako-san raise her voice like that was during their performance of "Cinderella" at the cultural festival the previous year.

She took a deep breath, then said:

"I'm the owner of that juzu."

"Shimako-san!"

Nijou Noriko screamed.

"Shimako-sama."

"Rosa Gigantea."

Shimako-san silently let the cries of her name wash over her. She had probably been first to arrive at the answer that Nijou Noriko was searching for.

"Would you care to explain?"

Sachiko-sama asked Shimako-san after the noise in the chapel had died down.

"Before that, I'd like you to excuse Noriko's behavior. Noriko was just protecting me."

It was just like Shimako-san to protect Nijou Noriko. Saying that if there was a penalty, she should be the one to pay it.

"No, I should be the one ... !"

Nijou Noriko jumped in. But then Rei-sama gently put her arm around her shoulder and whispered something in her ear. Probably asking her to stay quiet for a little while. Now that the conversation was finally heading in a good direction, they didn't want Nijou Noriko muddying the waters.

"Why would a devout Christian like you – "

Nobody breathed as they awaited the next words.

"Because my family runs a Buddhist temple."

Words could not express how beautiful Shimako-san looked as she faced the chapel's cross and made this magnificent declaration.

The face of someone who had sacrificed themselves, but gained something.

Everyone was speechless.

(... She finally said it.)

It was hard to believe it had gone that well. On the way, they'd departed from the original scenario a fair bit, but the end result had been just fine. Shimako-san seemed to walk easier, as though a load had been removed from her shoulders, when she went over to Nijou Noriko and said:

"You worked so hard to protect me, I'm sorry."

"Shimako-san!"

The pair embraced. Nijou Noriko cried like a child, despite her somewhat cold exterior.

(Huh ...)

How did that happen? Tears were streaming down Yumi's cheeks too.

(Wawawa.)

One after another, the tear drops fell from her chin onto the chapel floor, making a polka-dot pattern. She thought it was foolish of her, since she was one of the people that set the surprise, but now that her spring had sprung Yumi found she couldn't reign it back in.

Clap, clap, clap, clap.

"You finally said it, Shimako-san."

Sachiko-sama said as she applauded.

"Oh brother. This year's entertainment was fairly over the top, wasn't it."

Rei-sama shrugged.

"Huh?"

The crying, hugging pair raised their heads and looked around.

"A big round of applause to Shimako and Noriko-san for showing us a vision of beautiful sisterly love!"



Sachiko-sama's voice resounded through the microphone, followed by surging waves of applause echoing around the chapel. The atmosphere in the place was already like a concert, and although no-one said it, they were all thinking, "Yes!"

Whether Shimako-san's confession was real, or just part of the entertainment, it was all good. Either way it was deeply moving. The vast majority of the students seemed to feel that way.

"This is for the best, right?"

Yumi couldn't stop herself from asking.

"Don't you think it's fine?"

Sachiko-sama said, smiling.

"... Right. I guess you're right."

At any rate, the juzu was safely returned to Shimako-san, and Shimako-san looked refreshed, like she'd cast out her demons.

Tsutako-san captured it all with her camera.

Mami-san was already writing it out in her student diary.

Just as they were about to get the welcoming ceremony back on track.

"Touko!"

Nijou Noriko's furious roar echoed around the tall ceiling of the chapel.

Part 6.

"What, it's over already?"

As they exited the chapel, they ran into Satou Sei-sama.

"What's over?"

Sachiko-sama, Rei-sama, Yoshino-san and Yumi all asked in unison.

"Something happened, right? A momentous occasion for Shimako."

"An occasion?"

That seemed a bit wrong.

"I hurried over as soon as my classes finished, but it doesn't look like I made it in time."

Even though she'd said something about not relying on her after she'd graduated. Perhaps that meant she hadn't completely cut off all contact, since she got worried and came to check on the situation herself. And even though no-one had talked to her about it, she'd managed to sniff it out on her own.

"Were you worried?"

"Well, yeah. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't. But looking at your faces, I imagine it was a success."

"Thanks to you."

Sachiko-sama said without a trace of irony. But since Sei-sama didn't actually do anything, or rather couldn't do anything, she simply looked conflicted and smiled.

"Ah right. If you'd like, why don't we all go somewhere? My treat."

Sei-sama proposed, after sneaking a look inside the chapel and seeing Shimako-san and Noriko-chan happily cleaning.

"Thanks for the offer, but Yoshino and I have a prior engagement."

Rei-sama and Yoshino-san had their monthly "Hasekura and Shimazu family dinner" tonight.

"Well, that's a shame. So, how about the Red Roses?"

A glance. This time their eyes met. Adding Sei-sama might make it more lively and fun, but Yumi felt like spending some time alone with Sachiko-sama.

"We'll excuse ourselves as well. Sorry, but Yumi and I have to plan what we're going to do on our day off."

Sachiko-sama politely declined Sei-sama's offer without consulting Yumi. Since they hadn't previously arranged to plan their day off, Yumi perked up a bit because she interpreted this as Sachiko-sama also wanting to spend some time alone with her too.

Sei-sama whistled.

"So lonely. I've been dumped by my juniors. I wonder if my classmates will console me. Ah, Yamada-chan. I guess I will be joining you after all."

Sei-sama called out to a group leaving the university grounds, then took off running, saying, "See you later."

"She seems to be quite popular."

"Yeah."

"Even though she said she was lonely."

Well, that's how she was. Everyone seemed to understand and nodded.

"Rei and Yoshino-chan, are your bags in the classroom? If so, you can head home now."

Sachiko-sama asked when they arrived at the entrance, taking possession of the medallion boxes that Yoshino-san had been holding.

"Since Yumi and I left our bags in the Rose Mansion."

"Ah, you're planning your day off together? Sounds nice, Yumi-chan."

"Ah, yes ... "

She agreed with Rei-sama noncommittally, then recovered the cardboard box that she'd accidentally let slip down a bit. "Planning their day off" had just been an excuse for Sachiko-sama to refuse Sei-sama's invitation, but since Sachiko-sama had kept on walking with an unconcerned look on her face, Yumi didn't know what they were really going to do.

"Please wait up, onee-sama."

When they arrived in front of the Rose Mansion, Sachiko-sama came to a complete stop and asked Yumi:

"Is there anything that you want?"

"Huh?"

She suddenly asked, completely out of the blue.

"It'll have to be for White Day and your birthday combined, however. I'll buy you something as a present."

"Huh!?"

Opening a surprising treasure chest.

"I've been putting it off for all kinds of reasons. But it's been bothering me."

Sachiko-sama looked incredibly lovely as she awkwardly mumbled.

"Ah, well. How about another half-day date then?"

Yumi proposed, jumping on board the lie about planning their next day off.

"That sounds nice. Is there anywhere you want to go?"

"... The amusement park."

Although having the date at an amusement park might have been a twist. But since she'd been asked, she thought she might as well go for it. She wasn't just saying it. She really wanted to go.

Hearing this, Sachiko-sama thought for a little while before answering.

"I'm not going on the roller coaster."

Despite adding a condition, she had unmistakeably given the go-ahead.

The cherry blossoms were no longer blooming anywhere.

Afterword

What, you were worried about that?

Hello, this is Konno.

Well, there are pros and cons to being one of those that got it, but I feel a bit relieved today now that I've delivered "Maria-sama ga Miteru: Cherry Blossom."

The first half, "The Cherry in the Ginkgoes," is the "magazine story" that I've often mentioned in previous afterwords, and there had been a lot of requests, both from the editorial department and in letters sent to me, to turn it into a light novel series, so it was something of a problem child. It was becoming hard to get hold of, since it was published about a year ago, and some of the people who hadn't read it at the time were visiting libraries just to look for it ... sorry for the inconvenience.

Now then.

When I said there were pros and cons, one of the things I was conscious of is how things have changed up to now.

First and foremost, the change in the main characters.

The previous third-years, Mizuno Youko, Torii Eriko, and Satou Sei have all graduated, although Sei makes a brief cameo in this book, and a bunch of new first-years are strutting around like they own the place.

For those of you who have been reading since the first "Maria-sama ga Miteru" novel, this cast change may seem bewildering, leaving you feeling conflicted, like Yumi in the middle of "Background Noise." Because it surprised me how popular the former Roses were.

But in one sense it had all been leading up to this point. Because "The Cherry in the Ginkgoes" is like the genesis of the "Maria-sama ga Miteru" series.

So, I'm not going to say you should force yourself to like the new faces, but it would make me happy if you watched over them for the long term.

Incidentally.

As per the first words of this afterword, I'm sure there will be plenty of readers who will feel it's a bit of an anticlimax and say, "What? That's it," when they find out the cause of Shimako's worries. With all I've written of Shimako's suffering to now, there were some people who imagined she must have been carrying an unthinkable secret.

However, I don't think the impression of Shimako is an over-exaggeration. The person who's worrying about something can dig themselves into a hole that's far deeper than those around them can imagine. Young people in particular seem to do this. When you're in the middle of it, you get caught up in what's going to happen tomorrow and can't take the long view.

But I digress.

About a page ago I wrote, "first," but there hasn't been a "next" yet.

Let's see, next, right. Thanks to Noriko, there's now the scent of boys. "Takuya-kun," still with only a first name. Noriko herself denies the boyfriend theory, but those readers who don't want any males in the cast are surely booing. I understand. Even so, here he is (... no need to comment).

Oh, while I said there were pros and cons, everything so far has been cons. But the pros are the reverse of all the cons. There were readers interested in Noriko and Touko, as well as those who thought that "having boys highlights the good parts of the girls."

At any rate, Yumi and Sachiko, Yoshino, Rei and Shimako are all going strong, so I don't think there will be any changes to the cast of "Maria-sama ga Miteru" from here on.

There were a number of corrections and amendments made in this version of "The Cherry in the Ginkgoes" compared to the magazine one. But most of the contents are unchanged.

I looked for the disk, but couldn't find it (or, rather, maybe it wasn't put on disk in the first place. Since I faxed over the manuscript). Like an idiotic author, I had to type it back into my computer from the magazine. It seemed

like a bit of a waste, but it may have been for the best. It took some time, but it felt like it helped me remember the feel of the characters Noriko and Touko.

There's still some pages left, so about the Maria Festival.

The Maria Festival.

They had such a thing when I was in kindergarten.

So while I wrote that it was peculiar to Lillian's, it would be wonderful if Catholic schools had a festival of the same name. Although it could cover a number of things.

When I was in kindergarten, the younger boys and girls would hold hands and walk to the statue of Maria, where they'd make an offering of carnations.

The older girls would be angels. The boys, I don't know, they would wear something like a sailor's uniform, or a choir uniform, or pants that looked like those from old European nobility. At the time I didn't really question it, but I wonder what they were supposed to be dressed as.

Incidentally, I was only average height back then, so I was a flower bearing angel. I faced the statue of Maria and scattered petals over it.

Every girl looks cute when dressed as an angel. (Spare me the jokes about reveling in my decades old glory.)

Now, to the present.

Once again my supervisor has changed. This time it's an older lady.

Since the previous supervisor was only here for a short time you may be suspicious that they left because of a fight, but rest assured it was simply due to a re-organization of the editorial department.

... Although I doubt anyone was actually worried about that.

Konno Oyuki.